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BOOK

ALL SHOOK UP

Peyson Antholz

Complete & Unabridged



ONE WAY TO PROVE HIMSELF A MAN

"Dammit!" Stanley said. "I'd be the last guy in the world to say there's anything queer about you. I just said that Carol is a *nice* girl."

But Alan didn't seem to feel that he had made his point. "Now that you've brought it up, I'll tell you what I've decided. I'm gonna get mine or I'm gonna quit going with her. I'll put it to her tonight. I'll tell her we're going to a motel, and she can either go or we're through."

"You're crazy, Al. You don't want to break up with Carol over something like that. She's nuts about you."

"Let her show it. I'm tired of having everyone think I'm a freak or something."

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Alan Peerman

At seventeen his life wasn't worth more than a toss of a coin to him.

Howard Stirche

He was too different to remain unscathed by vicious rumor.

Clyde Peerman

He was a "real man" and had to prove it over and over again.

Robbie Hite

Everyone called him a half-wit until he settled an old score.

Grace Peerman

The thermometer of her religious ardor was her husband's infidelity.

Steve Tibbs

His side income was selling liquor to jailbait.

ALL SHOOK UP

by

PEYSON ANTHOLZ

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ALL SHOOK UP

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If all men count with you, but none too much . . .
. . . Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a man, my son.

—From *IF*
by Rudyard Kipling

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CHAPTER ONE

Something happened the summer Alan Peerman was seventeen. Before that time, everyone had spoken of him as a good, steady, reliable boy. Then almost overnight he changed, and suddenly nothing was too crazy for him to do. Like the time he got Ketch Martin into the car with him and then raced a train for the crossing at ninety miles an hour. Or the time he held onto the underside of a tie in the railroad trestle and let the Memphis Flyer pass overhead while his body swayed in the air fifty feet above Cagle's Ford. Each new escapade was a matter of much speculation, and Alan became nearly as choice a conversational piece that summer as the weather and baseball.

Steve Tibbs, the bartender at Nate Pendleton's place, said that Alan was crazy. Of course, he couldn't broadcast his reason for thinking so, but to those he confided in, it made quite a story. Steve was behind the bar one day when someone rapped on the little pane of glass in the door to the back room. When Steve went to see who it was, he found Alan.

"How about half a pint of Deep River?" Alan asked him.

"What makes you think you can buy it here?" Steve demanded.

"Jack Deno said he gets stuff here all the time," Alan said. "Doesn't he?"

"Oh, I help the boys out once in a while," Steve said cautiously.

"Well, okay, help me out," Alan said. "I want a half pint of Deep River."

"You Clyde Peerman's boy?" Steve demanded.

"Yeah."

"How old are you?"

"Nineteen."

"You are like hell! You're not even eighteen, are you?"

"Okay, so I'm seventeen. What's the difference? What's a coupla months make?"

"It'll cost you two bucks."

"How come it's two bucks? It's a buck and a quarter down at the drug store."

"Then why don't you go to the drug store and get it?"

"Is that the cheapest you got?"

"Yeah." Steve moved away as if to go. "Take it or leave it."

"I'll take it."

Steve brought the bottle of whiskey back in a little paper sack and took Alan's two dollar bills.

"Put it inside your shirt till you get outside," he cautioned.

"Don't worry," Alan said.

"And if you ever want any more some time, don't be scratchin' on the door. Someone'll see you. Just sit down at that table and wait. I come back here every once in awhile."

Steve pointed to a rickety little table shoved up against the bare, brick wall behind a haphazard pile of empty paper boxes. Around the table were grouped a few chairs in equally disreputable condition. All looked as if they might be refuse from the front room.

"Okay," Alan said, starting out. "I'll want some more, I imagine." Nearly to the door, he suddenly turned back. "Say, you haven't got some reefers, have you?"

Steve was incredulous. "What?"

"Reefers," Alan said.

"You mean them marijuana cigarettes they smoke?"

"Sure you smoke them. What'd you think?"

"What the hell would a kid like you want with something like that?"

"Whatta you suppose I want with them?"

"Don't you know them things'll kill you?"

"Okay, okay," Alan said. "Take it easy. I just wondered what they're like, that's all." He went on out the door, the bottle of whiskey making a little bulge in the front of his shirt.

Holding onto the underside of the trestle while the Memphis Flyer passed over him brought more comment than anything Alan had done up to that time.

"You crazy, damned fool!" Vic Hamilton, owner of the poolroom, said. "What was you tryin' to do? Kill yourself?"

"Aw, it wasn't that bad," Alan protested.

"The hell it wasn't!" Vic said. "What if you'd lost your hold?"

"I'd've just-a dropped into the water. There's water all under that trestle."

"Bull! The water at Cagle's Ford ain't a foot deep in the summertime!"

"How come you done it?" Ketch Martin wanted to know.

"I did it for fun," Alan said shortly.

"Yeah!" Ketch said derisively. "A lot of fun it'd a been if you'd fell off and broke both legs, wouldn't it?"

"He did it because Sid Kile dared him to," Stanley Mack spoke up. "A bunch of us'd been swimming out at the gravel pit. We was on the way home."

"How'd you hold on?" Ketch asked Alan.

"I just held onto the tie."

"Didn't it jar hell outta you?"

"Naw! It wasn't bad."

"If you don't quit doin' all these damned fool things, you're gonna break your head open one of these days," Vic Hamilton predicted with a ferocity that was calculated to do good.

"He does it to show off for Carol Hibble," Jack Deno said.

Alan bent his head and studied the unimaginative display of candy bars in the poolroom showcase.

"Give me one of those chocolate bars, Vic," Alan said, pointing. "With almonds."

"One male candy bar coming up." Vic chanted the cliché with a heartiness that made it fresh again. Like the freshness of a baby saying Daddy for the ten thousandth time when that's the only word it knows. Alan forced a smile and pretended to be amused.

"You better stop acting like you do," Carol Hibble told him.

"What'd I do?" Alan demanded.

"I mean hanging under that trestle and letting a train run over you."

"It didn't hurt anything."

"It was crazy! Just like driving the way you do!"

"I don't drive fast when you're along."

"I don't care if you don't. Everyone still talks about you."

"It's none of their business what I do!"

"Well, it's my business!" Then, more gently, she said, "How come you do things like that, Alan? You didn't use to be like that."

There was a long silence, and then he answered dully, "I don't know." Then after another silence, he added, "You don't know how it is with a bunch of guys when they're out."

"You mean the other boys cause you to do those crazy things? Like letting a train run over you?" There was disbelief in her voice.

"Oh, I don't know," Alan said. "In a way they do, I guess. I don't know."

"What do they have to do with it?"

"Nothing."

"Well, you just said I don't know the way they act. How do they act?"

"Oh, I don't know. Always saying someone's a sissy or something like that."

"No one says *you're* a sissy, do they, for heaven's sake?"

"Not me, they don't," Alan declared positively. "They all know I got more guts than any of them."

At the *Western County Herald* office, where Alan addressed papers for out-of-town readers, Howard Stirche was sitting at his desk to the right of the door when Alan went in the afternoon of the trestle swinging. He saw Howard look up quickly at his entrance, but he hurried on past him back to where the addressing machine stood, his own little corner of this inked-in world of paper. From the corner of his eye, he saw Howard get up and start that way. He turned his back and began to tinker with the addressing machine. Howard stood without speaking for several seconds while Alan pretended not to notice that he was there. When Howard spoke, his voice was easy.

"Hi, Alan," he said.

"Hi," Alan answered shortly without turning around.

"We got a coupla new names for you," Howard said. "I put them in with your stencils."

"Oh. All right. Thanks."

There was another short silence. Then Howard said, "I kind-a looked for you up last night."

"I had a date," Alan said quickly.

"With Carol?"

"Yeow."

Howard moved around to the other side of the addressing machine to get away from Alan's back. "I finished another chapter last night," he said.

"That's swell," Alan said without enthusiasm.

"Aren't you interested in the novel any more?"

"Sure, I'm interested in it."

"Why don't you ever come up and see how it's going? You haven't been up for over three weeks."

"I been busy," Alan said. "I got lots of things to do now."

"Maybe you'd be better off if you didn't do so many things," Howard suggested.

Alan didn't answer.

"You're going to get into trouble some of these times," Howard went on. "Don't you know that?"

"You mean about the railroad trestle?" Alan asked without looking up.

"Yes . . . that. And other things."

There was another short silence. Then Howard put out his hand toward Alan's shoulder. "Why don't you tell me what's wrong, Alan?" he said.

Alan avoided the hand. "There's nothing wrong! I gotta get the papers ready," he said and hurried away toward the thinly partitioned back room. where the whirr of the press could be heard like the engine of a huge ship. A diesel that burned ink.

As representative for the Sivits Brothers' Furnace Company of Chicago, Alan's father was home only on week-ends. Ordinarily he came in early Friday evening and left early on Monday morning. His first stop upon entering Varoo was usually Walter Sholty's filling station; it was his last stop before leaving. It was not the quality of service that exerted this compelling force. Walter never checked an oil stick in his life without being asked; neither did Slim Farrel, his attendant. And it wasn't until the big, new super service station opened just down the street a block that they began to ask grudgingly if "you want your windshield cleaned". Yet few businesses could claim the whole hearted allegiance of their patrons that Walter Sholty's enjoyed, and the impressive gallonage report he turned in each month never failed to confound the oil company's district supervisor and his inflexible ideas of correct operating procedure.

What the district supervisor never understood was that Walter Sholty's was more than a filling station. It was a retreat. It was the tree-top house that every boy builds in

his mind when he's nine years old and carries with him into manhood. It was an atmosphere free from the restraining influence of everything feminine, an atmosphere that lent flavor to the Cokes and pungency to the raw stories. It was comradeship mellowed by the aromatic masculinity of oil pumped from the big, smudged, once-white barrels that stood in front of the windows and stared out like pale, bilious eyes on guard.

Some of those whom Walter Sholty was pleased to call customers didn't even own a car. There were those who dropped in merely to odd-man for the drinks. There were those who came for a gallon of kerosene and stayed an hour. There was a story that when Old Man Daniels remodeled his house, he refurnished everything except the kerosene cook stove they had in the kitchen. And that he refused to part with because keeping it supplied with fuel was his only contact with Walter Sholty's filling station now that his sight had begun to fail and he was forced to give up driving.

Alan was waiting in the station when Clyde pulled in the Friday evening after the trestle swinging.

"Well, look who just come rollin' in!" Walter Sholty said to Alan. "The old man hisself!"

Slim Farrel went out to service the car while Alan waited with Walter and three loafers for Clyde to come inside.

"There's the Big Shot," Walter greeted in a hearty voice when Clyde came through the door.

"Well! Looks like everyone's here," Clyde greeted the group.

"Hi, Clyde," said the three loafers.

"What're you doin' here?" Clyde said to Alan.

"I figured you'd stop in here first," Alan said. "I thought I'd ride home with you."

"Mommie all right?" Clyde asked.

"Yeah, she's fine."

"Gotta be good to Mommie," Clyde said. Then he turned,

grinning broadly, and said to Walter Sholty, "Gotta be good to Mommie, Walt."

Walter grinned too. It was as if the words had some not readily apparent meaning, a magic phrase admitting those who were members into a secret brotherhood. Alan felt uncomfortable.

"How'd things go this week, Clyde?" Walter asked.

"Couldn't kick if I wanted to," Clyde declared. "Two hundred and seventy-five bucks! And I just worked three days. That's not bad, is it?"

"Two hundred and seventy-five bucks!" one of the loafers said, his voice rising all the way to the end.

"I'd work a month for that!" the second man admired.

The third man whistled.

"Oh, we don't think anything about that," Clyde said in a big brother tone. "We do that every once in awhile."

"That'll hit hard about income tax time, won't it, Clyde?" Walter's manner was that of a straight man.

Clyde winked knowingly at the loafers and delivered the punch line. "Income taxes was made out by a man, and I always say that what one man figures out, another man can outfigure."

All the men laughed at this.

"They gotta be mighty sharp to outfigure old Clyde," one of the loafers declared.

"I'll say!" another one contributed.

Clyde moved toward the Coke machine in one corner. "Buy you boys a Coke?" he offered.

"Sure, Clyde," Walter said. "If you're sure it won't break you up."

"I believe I can afford it," Clyde said.

The other three men also accepted the invitation, and Clyde pushed coins into the machine with an air of condescension almost as if he were sorry Cokes didn't cost more. On the wall above the machine was a calendar with

the picture of a semi-nude girl who appeared to be all legs and long hanging hair.

"Say!" the most imaginative one of the loafers exclaimed. "How'd you like to climb into bed with something like that?"

"Uh-UH!" another one approved emphatically. "Wrap that long hair around you to keep warm and lay right up against it all night!"

"Yeah!" from the third one. "With this Coke bottle about half full of Deep River to pour down you every once in a while. Ever' time you needed primin'."

"How'd you like that, Clyde?"

Clyde grinned and took a long swallow of Coke.

"You never did see old Clyde turn down something like that, did you?" Walter spoke for him.

"Say, where's that Lindley girl? I hain't seen her for more'n a year," from one of the men. "You used to get next to that once in awhile, didn't you, Clyde?"

Clyde looked quickly toward Alan, who hid his expression behind his upraised bottle of Coke.

Walter noticed the look and snorted. "Hell, you don't need to worry about Al. He's gonna be just like his old man. Hain't you, Al?"

Alan grinned sheepishly and bent over a long time putting his empty bottle into the case, waiting for the conversation to pass on. He didn't do much loafing at Walter Sholty's, partly because it was the domain of his father and Alan felt freer someplace else, and partly because Slim Farrel had made him sick once. Alan had been barely fifteen at the time, and he stopped in one night when Slim Farrel had been on duty: fat, sloppy Slim Farrel, wearing his dirty, greasy coveralls buttoned right up under his chin and giving the illusion that his face had popped out of them because the coveralls were too slick to keep it covered. As a variation on their customary odd-manning for the drinks, Slim and two others loafing in the place were each going to tell a dirty story.

Alan was to be the judge and whichever one told the dirtiest story was to receive a drink from each of the two losers. Slim won. Hands down. He gave one of the drinks to Alan, but the bottle had no sooner touched Alan's lips than he jerked it down again and made a hasty run for the men's room, where he vomited into the stool to the great amusement of the three men, who laughed at him and declared that Slim's story really separated the men from the boys. Alan denied it was the story that made him sick and insisted it was something in the bottled drink, but he knew that the men were right. Ever since that night, Alan had avoided Walter Sholty's filling station unless he was there to ride home with Clyde, or something, as he was tonight.

"I just thought of something!" Walter Sholty exclaimed suddenly. "Why didn't I think of it before?" He was looking at Clyde as if really seeing him for the first time. "Clyde, I gotta big deal for you."

"I never turned down a big deal in my life," Clyde said, grinning at the loafers.

"The Chamber of Commerce meets tonight," Walter said. "And I'm chairman of the entertainment committee. I had old Judge Wickard all set to make a talk. I was countin' on it, see? And now the judge's out of town." He laid a hand on Clyde's shoulder. "Clyde, there's not a reason in the world why you can't come to that dinner and take his place."

Clyde snorted derisively. "What's the matter with you Walt?" he said. "I couldn't take old Judge Wickard's place. I never made a speech in my life." The words were definite enough, but Clyde's eyes were shining.

"Aw, bull!" Walter said. "You got a line of crap a mile long. I've heard you when you light in to sell some poor bastard one of them furnaces. You'd make a good speaker."

Clyde laughed in tacit admission of his talents.

"Damned if I wouldn't-a asked you before I did him if I'd-a thought of it," Walter said.

"They wouldn't want to hear me," Clyde continued to object. "Not if they was all set to hear Judge Wickard."

"Sure, they would!" Walter declared. "They know old Clyde's been around."

Clyde smiled happily. "I don't know anything about makin' a speech."

"Neither did Abraham Lincoln till he made one," Walter said.

"What time's it supposed to be?"

"Eight o'clock."

"Eight o'clock?" The dismay in Clyde's voice was genuine this time. "Hell, Walt, it's six now!"

"Well, what of it?" Walter demanded. "If I know old Clyde the way I think I do, he can line up enough crap in two hours to talk all night! Forty or forty-five minutes's all it needs to be."

"I don't know what I'd talk about." The tone indicated that Clyde was already searching deep down for a topic.

"Talk about your sellin' experiences," Walter suggested. "Things that've happened to you out on the road."

"But not *everything* that's happened to you out on the road, Clyde," one of the loafers cautioned knowingly.

"You'll have to leave the woman stuff out, Clyde," another loafer said.

"They're just a bunch-a reg'lar guys!" Walter said, and then he added, "Of course, you wouldn't want to put *too* much woman in it. We got a *few* old fuddy-duddies."

"In other words, Clyde, they're more interested in hearing about things you've sold than things you've bought," the first loafer summed up, and everyone laughed.

Alan joined in self consciously. Grown-up sex was something like liquor. He always had the uncomfortable feeling that it was being handed to him out the back door.

Clyde objected some more, but it was only token resistance, and by the time Alan and he were ready to leave, things were all set. Clyde was to make a forty-five minute talk that

night at eight o'clock for the weekly Chamber of Commerce dinner at Belle's restaurant.

Slim Farrel was standing by the pump when Clyde and Alan got into the car. "How'd things go this week, Clyde?" Slim asked.

"Oh, great, Slim! Great!" Clyde said. "Two hundred and seventy-five bucks' worth."

Slim whistled. "Al's been pretty busy too, hasn't he?" he said.

"How's that?" Clyde asked.

"Didn't you hear about out at Cagle's Ford this week?"

Slim looked uncertainly toward Alan. Alan sat impassively, his gaze on the dashboard.

"I been gone all week," Clyde said. "I just got in. What's he been doin' now?"

"He held onto a railroad tie in the trestle and let the Memphis Flyer run over him."

Clyde blinked and turned fiercely to Alan. "What the hell'd you want to do a thing like that for?"

"Aw it didn't hurt anything," Alan said.

"I oughtta beat hell outta you!" Clyde declared. "If you're not doin' one damned fool thing, it's something else."

There was a look of anger on Clyde's face, but harsh as the words were, Alan sensed a lack of any real feeling to go with them. They were merely a sop to Slim Farrel. Anyone could tell that Slim expected Clyde to care, and Alan knew from a good many years back and a good many incidents past that his father was always quick to do the thing that other men expected him to do. Maybe that's what made him a good salesman. Anyway, Alan *supposed* he was a good salesman. Clyde always said he was.

"Get yourself a Coke, Slim," Clyde said tossing him a dime just before he pulled the car away from the pump. "I bought all the other boys one."

The Peerman house was a frame building covered with

siding material designed to look like bricks. A long driveway went past it back to the garage, a two storied building also covered with the brick siding material and with a set of wooden steps going up one side. Light, and the sound of a typewriter, came through an open window in the upper part of the garage.

"Is that Howard Stirche up there?" Clyde asked, standing in the driveway looking up at the lighted window.

"I guess so," Alan said.

"What's he doin'? Still workin' on a novel?"

"Yeah."

"He might be able to help me with that speech," Clyde said. "Let's go up and see him a minute."

"You go on." Alan turned toward the house.

"I thought you two was great buddies," Clyde said.

"We are," Alan said. "I just wantta get ready for supper, that's all."

"Well, you can come on up with me, can't you?" Clyde said. "I don't know him very well. Never said more'n a half-dozen words to him long as he's been here."

"Yeah, I guess I can if you want me to," Alan said.

He didn't want to go.

CHAPTER TWO

HOWARD STIRCHE had lived in Varoo for nine months, the first two of which had been spent in the town's only hotel. There, outside of working hours, he had lived and slept and worked at writing a novel in a single, cheerless, little

bedroom. During working hours, he had the empty title of chief reporter for the *Western County Herald*. Empty because "reporting" for the *Herald* consisted mostly of selecting news stories from the wire service so as to give what purported to be world-wide news coverage. Other than this, there was little more to the job than occasionally answering the telephone when the office girl was out, taking down a never ending succession of inconsequential drivel given by country women with shrill voices, and then printing it all in the paper as something called Local Items. Local happenings of importance were covered by someone else in the office, or by Ben Clawson, editor and owner of the paper, which had been under the ownership of the Clawson family for three generations.

Although his four years of college were being wasted in a function approximating that of office boy, Howard never gave any indication of caring. He did his routine work efficiently and without interest, selecting world-shaking news stories from the wire service and contorting their shape to fit them onto the front page like tight little islands engulfed in a sea of prattling verbosity.

The solitary nature of his work and his preoccupation with the novel gave Howard little opportunity for contact with his fellowmen, and he sought none. He had never considered himself anti-social, but in twenty-nine years he had had plenty of opportunity to learn that a detachment for most of the trivial things that the average person considered important had placed him outside the pale of possible friendship with them. Most people he didn't care to know, and those he might have found desirable seemed to be forever shut out by his thoughtful, indrawn temperament. There was little in the life around him that he found interesting, and there was no acquaintance in town he sought to cultivate except Alan's.

The first day Howard had gone to work for the *Herald*, Ben Clawson had introduced him to the office staff: Darrel

Speeney, sports, whom Howard had disliked immediately; Martha Hargis, society, who picked her nose when she thought no one was looking; and a near-sighted young man named Cletus Marivaney, who wore thick glasses and was designated by Ben Clawson as general reporter. In addition to these three, there were the office girl, Connie Ferris, and an unknown number of pressmen and others who stayed in the back room and did the actual printing of the paper.

Alan didn't make an appearance until that evening after school. Howard was busy at his typewriter, and wouldn't even have noticed him, but Alan stopped beside his desk.

"You the new reporter?" he asked.

Howard looked up to see a tall, good-looking boy with a blond crew-cut and friendly, blue eyes. "Yeah," he said. "I'm Howard Stirche."

"I'm glad to know you, Mr. Stirche." Alan held out a hand. "I'm Alan Peerman. I work here too."

They shook hands, and Howard said, "I thought I met everyone this morning."

"I just come in the evening," Alan said. "I address out-of-town papers."

Howard wasn't very good at meeting people. He usually couldn't think of anything to say. "Oh, I see," was the best he could muster.

"If there's anything I can do for you, show you where something is or anything like that, just let me know," Alan said.

"Sure. Thanks," Howard said, and that was about the extent of their first meeting.

It was Saturday evening before they talked together again. The office cleared early on Saturday, and by four o'clock the only one left besides Howard and Alan was Darrel Speeney, who sat at his desk typing. There was a final wild clacking of keys, and Speeney slapped the cover down on his typewriter without taking the paper from the

carriage or even reading over what he had written. He stopped by Howard's desk just about the time that Alan, back in his corner of the room, finished addressing papers and began stacking them in a box for a trip to the post office.

"Well, how'd you like Varoo by this time?" Speeney asked Howard.

Howard looked up. Speeney had been trying to be friendly all week. A half-dozen times he had attempted to start a conversation, all attempts following a old familiar pattern: a pseudo-heartly overture meant to warm the cockles of the heart; a "just heard" joke, not too off-color, but off-color enough to reveal the teller as a regular guy; a broad statement about the latest football game, meant to stir enthusiasm, or maybe even intellect; a desperate spurt of opinion in a vain attempt to keep the conversational balloon in the air; and finally the inglorious retreat, made doubly awkward by a reluctance to burn any bridges that might be useful in some later thrust. It wasn't merely that Howard disliked Darrel Speeney. But he had met the type before and had tried to be friendly, only to realize a little later that there was absolutely no basis for the friendship, and it would be just as well if it had never been attempted in the first place.

This time it was apparent that Speeney was off on a new tack. The man-to-man heartiness he had evinced on previous occasions was overlaid with an unexpected solemnity that was very like sincerity. "I thought after a week you'd probably have some impressions by now," he said.

"Oh, I like Varoo fine," Howard said. "It's a nice little town."

"Finest people in the world here!" Speeney's ebullience couldn't be suppressed for long. Already he was beginning to bubble again. "I thought you might like to meet a couple of them tonight."

Howard didn't want to meet anybody. He wanted to work

on his novel, but he didn't like to hurt Speeney's feelings when the man was going to such lengths to be friendly. "Well, I don't know," Howard hedged, trying to think of some out.

"The cutest pair of doll babies you ever saw in your life!" Speeney leered at Howard as if they were fellow conspirators and screwed his face up in a connoisseur's expression of extreme approval.

Howard's dislike for the man because almost tangible. He could feel it like a hot vapor in his head. "I don't believe I'd better," he said.

"What's the matter? Don't you like girls?" Speeney said. There was an appraising look in his eyes. Howard had seen the look before—back in Linway. He wanted to tell Speeney about Harriet. Tell him about Harriet and then hit him in the teeth. But he didn't. It would sound silly. Harriet had been dead for over a year now, and Speeney wouldn't understand.

So Howard merely said, "I been kind-a doing a little writing nights."

"Yeah?" Speeney looked interested. "What're you? A Hemingway or something?"

Howard wished immediately he hadn't mentioned the writing. He knew how most people felt about writers who didn't make lots of money. He had learned that the hard way too. But it was too late now. He had started it. He'd have to carry through. "I been working on a novel," he said.

"A novel?" Speeney pretended to be impressed. "Whatta you ever had published?"

The man's tone of voice presupposed the answer, and Howard didn't disappoint him. "Nothing," he said.

Speeney sniffed. "You don't wantta go then?"

"No, thanks. Some other time maybe."

Speeney turned away abruptly. "Just trying to be friendly," he said, and Howard knew from the tone of voice that

Darrel Speeney would never bother to force him into conversation again.

Speeney went out the front door.

Howard was just putting the cover on his typewriter when Alan came from the back carrying his box full of folded, addressed newspapers. He halted in front of Howard's desk.

"I heard you tell him you were writing a novel," he said.

"Yeah," Howard answered shortly. "I been kind-a writing a little."

"I think that's swell," Alan said.

The admiration in his voice sounded sincere, but Howard wouldn't have given odds. He had been fooled by experts, condescended to. He looked keenly into Alan's face, and there was no mistaking the approval in the boy's shining eyes. More than approval even. There was a kind of hunger there too. Howard felt embarrassed.

"I guess there's nothing so great about writing them," he mumbled, pretending to be having trouble getting a corner of the typewriter cover down. "It's selling them that matters."

"You got to write them first."

Howard didn't want to talk about it. He always felt like an impostor on those few occasions when anyone showed signs of being impressed at his writing. He wasn't a writer; he just wrote. There was quite a difference. Writers were okay, but between writers and those who only wrote there was a wide, wide gulf. And lonely.

"How come Speeney talks about going out with girls?" he said. "I thought he was married."

"He is," Alan said.

It was a good place to laugh. Ninety-nine guys out of a hundred giving the line would have laughed, or worse than that, smirked. But Alan didn't, and some of Howard's approval must have shown through. Or maybe the boy merely

sensed that the line had given him a minor victory because with his next one he was back to the original attack.

"What's the novel about?"

"That's hard to say. I haven't got it all figured out yet."

"Is it about murder or love?"

The way he said it made these two sound like the only possibilities, and Howard laughed. "Does it have to be one or the other?"

"I never read a book that wasn't."

"Maybe you haven't read very many books."

"I read all the time."

"Maybe you read the wrong books."

"Maybe. What is your book about?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, it does have a murder in it. Some love, too, I guess."

"Well?" Alan said in an I-told-you-so tone, and they both laughed.

"You going to the hotel now?" Alan asked.

"Yes."

"I'll walk along with you. I'm going to the post office."

They walked along together, and Alan said, "They subscribed to a writer's magazine at the high school library last year. I used to read it all the time."

"And now you don't?"

"They don't take it any more. There weren't enough people read it; that's what Miss Colich said." He smiled ruefully. "I don't think anyone read it but me."

Howard had the strange feeling that he was suddenly being permitted to look backward into his own life. The boy walking beside him, shifting the box of newspapers from one hip to another, was himself when he was in high school. The man he had become was someone else. Someone he didn't even know very well.

"Why did *you* read the magazine?" he asked softly. Alan didn't answer, and Howard said, "Well?"

"You won't tell anyone, will you?"

"Is it something to be ashamed of?"

"Aw, you don't know how it is. In a town like this . . ."

"You think not?"

"I wouldn't care what they thought—anybody! If I just . . ."

"If you what?"

"If I knew for sure they were wrong about it. But how do I know they're not right? Maybe I couldn't get a story printed even if I wrote it perfect. Lots of people could do things just as well as anybody else. Only they never get a chance."

Howard recognized the note of insistence. Alan wanted him to say something reassuring, to tell him it wasn't like that. But Howard wasn't familiar enough himself with the whole vague business of publishing to know for sure. And no glib, ready-made answer or half-truth would do. Not for this sensitive young boy who walked beside him and looked into his face so earnestly. Suddenly he liked the boy a lot.

"I knew a boy who could sing," Alan said. "He could sing just as well as anybody. Any of the big stars. Only he never got a chance."

"What happened to him?" Howard asked.

"I don't know. He just quit. I guess he got tired trying."

They were in front of the hotel, and Howard wished that the walk had been longer. The talk with Alan was the first thing stimulating or even interesting that had occurred during his first week in Varoo.

"This where you live?" Alan asked.

"Yeah, I got a room here."

"Well, I'll see you Monday at the office," Alan said and stood for a while shifting from one foot to the other as if he wished too that the talk could have been longer.

"So-long, Alan," Howard said and went into the hotel.

Monday evening when Alan appeared at the *Herald* office, he had two bottles of Coke. He gave one to Howard,

and they sat at Howard's desk drinking Coke until Ben Clawson came out of his private office glaring at them, and Alan hurried back to his addressing machine. There were other friendly gestures, too: an entire Saturday afternoon Alan spent trying to fix Howard's mechanical pencil when he complained that it was breaking leads; then the evening he asked Howard's help in return when something went wrong with the addressing machine.

In his lonely, small town isolation, Howard wasn't long in responding to Alan's friendly overtures: a cup of coffee, which Alan consumed manfully even though at home he always drank milk; two free movie passes, which Howard, as chief reporter for the *Western County Herald*, received each week and never used; a helping hand with an English composition once when Alan was struggling to meet a deadline.

And then came the Sunday afternoon that Howard was so lonely in his dismal, little, hotel room he could hardly stand it. He worked unrelentingly to get the first chapter of his novel down on paper and to forget the loneliness, but every time his eyes strayed from the typewriter, they settled on the single, dingy window with its view of rooftops and bare trees, and he remembered he was a stranger in a drab little town that up to a month ago he hadn't even known existed. Not that he regretted being here. Lonely as it was, Varoo was infinitely better than Linway. Linway without Harriet had been intolerable.

On that last day when she lay burning with fever, and the doctor said she was dying, he had begged a minister to marry them, and the minister had refused. Everyone thought Howard was crazy wanting to marry a dying girl. It wouldn't be legal anyway, they said; Harriet was out of her mind.

So it had been Death that took the bride, not Howard, even though his engagement ring was on her finger. The last memory he had of the funeral was his ring mocking him from the casket. When the lid of the casket was fastened

down, he could imagine the three of them cozily inside the box: Harriet and Death and Ring.

He had stayed on in Linway longer than he should have after that. It was a beautiful, sad thing to see a young man mourn for a lost love, but there had to be reason to it, an end. And when a year had passed, and the young man still mourned, that wasn't natural. Nothing about his life was natural. The way he shunned others in the *Linway Courier* office where he worked through the day, and the way he shut himself in his room at night. Women avoided him on the street, and men stared at him curiously. He knew what they were thinking—that he was a freak of some kind. But he didn't care.

Then the idea for the novel gradually grew within him, and its conception seemed to be the fruit of his union with Harriet. The desire to give it birth became overpowering. But somehow Linway robbed him of all vitality to make the start. So he had left Linway and gone to Varoo as chief reporter for the *Western County Herald*.

By the fourth lonely Sunday there his outward routine was as rigid as it had been in Linway. But there was a difference: Here he could think, and for the first time the novel seemed to be slowly stirring into life. Somehow the process of giving life brought his own being closer to reality than it had been for over a year. And, at last, toward evening of that fourth lonely Sunday there was a sudden rush of longing to be with other people. He was glad when it was time to go out for the evening meal. Even though he always sat at a table alone, there would be other people around him in the restaurant. And even if none of them seemed to notice him, he would still know that they were there.

He had just stepped outside the hotel door, and there was Alan sauntering slowly up the sidewalk. Howard wasn't greatly surprised. He had been unexpectedly bumping into

Alan often for the past two weeks. Alan quickened his walk and came up to Howard.

"I'm going to the restaurant for supper." Alan's eyes were shining with excitement. "Where're you going?"

"I'm going to the drug store for a package of cigarettes," Howard said to tease.

"Oh." The smile on Alan's face disappeared.

"Okay," Howard said, "I'm going to the restaurant too." And then he said in a way he intended to be casual, "You want to go together?" But the way it came out, it sounded anything but casual.

Alan didn't seem to notice the tension Howard could feel in his voice. His smile was back in an instant. "Sure!"

As they walked along toward the restaurant, Howard said, "Strange how we just happen to bump into each other so much, isn't it?"

Alan made a joke of it. "Small town."

Howard laughed. "I'm glad you came along," he said. "I was beginning to get a little lonely up in that peanut-size room of mine."

"You been in your room all day?"

"Where else would I be?"

"It looks like if you were lonesome, you'd go someplace."

"Like where?"

"Couldn't you visit somebody?"

"I don't know anybody."

"You know me." Alan said it quickly, and then as if to cover it up, he went on, "Where'd you come from?"

"Linway," Howard said shortly.

"Did you work on the paper up there?"

"Yes."

"How come you left there for Varoo?"

But by this time they were to the restaurant, which was crowded with Sunday evening diners, and in the confusion of entering and finding a table, Howard didn't answer.

They ate the specialty of the day—fried chicken—and

talked about writing as they usually did. And when the meal was over, Howard invited Alan up to his room to read chapter one. Alan accepted, as Howard had known he would, and they talked about the novel until midnight. Howard explained all about the characters, the plot, the thing he wanted to say—everything. And Alan listened. It wasn't merely polite listening; he was truly interested. It was midnight before Howard knew it. He even went down to the lobby to check his wristwatch with the big clock there.

A few nights later Howard was working as usual when there was a knock on his door. It was Alan, standing uncertainly in the hall.

"I just thought I'd stop in a little while," Allan said.

Howard smiled and opened the door wide. "Come in, Alan," he said. "See what you think of chapter two. I got it all plotted."

After that, Alan came often, suggesting impossible plot twists, questioning, approving. Sometimes he simply sat and watched Howard work. And when the Creagers moved out of the three-room apartment over the Peermans' garage, it was Alan who suggested that Howard move in. It was a welcome suggestion to Howard, and by the end of his second month in Varoo he was the Peermans' renter.

At first, Alan had spent almost as much time in Howard's apartment as he did in the house. He changed ribbons on Howard's typewriter, brewed coffee in his electric coffee maker, occasionally looked up words for him in the dictionary, and served as a willing guinea pig through innumerable writings and rewritings for chapters one through twenty. And then, as impetuously as they had begun, Alan's visits stopped. He even avoided Howard at the office, doing most of his going and coming through a rear door. And they never bumped into each other on the street as they once had "just happened" to.

Howard lay awake several nights wondering if he had unknowingly done something to offend Alan. He knew that

the deeper he had gone into the novel the more preoccupied he had become. He supposed that Alan had mistaken his preoccupation for an indication that he was not welcome, and Howard tried to set everything right several times by waylaying Alan at the office or someplace and issuing a point-blank invitation that he come up. At first Alan would come just long enough to drink a cup of coffee, but he always had some excuse for leaving early. And then he refused to come at all. Some of the reasons given were ridiculously thin, and when Howard pointed this out, Alan would promise to come. But he never did. For the past month, he hadn't been there at all.

And then one night Howard suddenly knew why. He wanted to let Alan know that he knew why, but there was no way to do it. Alan avoided him. And even if he didn't, there would have to be an opening.

CHAPTER THREE

ALAN DIDN'T want to go to Howard Stirche's apartment with his father, but when Clyde insisted on something, anything, there was nothing to do but let him have his way. They climbed the stairs with Alan in front. At the landing, he knocked, while Clyde stood close up against the building on the second step. Howard opened the door with a cup of coffee in one hand. He was wearing his old, green eyeshade and the frown of annoyance he usually assumed when his train of thought had been interrupted. But the annoyance was gone in a second when Howard saw Alan.

"Since when did you have to begin knocking?" he greeted as if it hadn't been a whole month since Alan had passed through the doorway.

"I got my dad with me," Alan said.

Howard looked at Clyde. "Come in?" he invited.

"Thanks." Clyde stepped into the room. "We'll just be a minute."

Alan followed his father inside. The room had the old, familiar look of a classroom revisited a year after graduation. Howard's typewriter was on a table ringed round by pencils, an ash tray, cigarettes, paper matches, and several stacks of typewritten sheets. Several other stacks of paper were lined up on the sofa and arms of the overstuffed chair. In front of the sofa was a coffee table containing an electric coffee maker and a half-dozen books. A bookcase along one wall contained more books—solid looking, substantial books with impressive titles and authors. Alan had heard some of them mentioned by his teachers. Despite the littered appearance of the room, it was basically well kept. A quick tidying would have put it in good shape.

"How's the novel comin'?" Clyde asked in his heartiest tone.

"Okay, I guess," Howard said. "Can I get you a cup of coffee?"

"No, thanks," Clyde said.

"How about you, Alan?"

"No, thanks," Alan said.

"What's it about?" Clyde asked.

Howard answered indecisively. "Oh, it's about a newspaper man and a small town. . . ."

"Got any sex in it?"

"A little, I guess."

"It'll sell then." Clyde was enthusiastic. "Sex and murder. That's what it takes to sell books." Then as if he felt that his opinion needed to be qualified, he said, "I'm a salesman."

"Yes, I know you are," Howard said. "Furnaces, isn't it?"

Clyde nodded. "I just get home on week-ends. I found out a while ago that the Chamber of Commerce is expectin' me to make a speech this evening. I didn't know a thing about it till I pulled in up here at the filling station just a few minutes ago."

He seemed to expect a response, and Howard said, "That's pretty short notice."

"Oh, they know I can do it," Clyde declared. "Talk's my business. That's how I make a livin'. The only thing is, I never made a *speech* before."

He paused, and it was clearly time for another response. But Howard filled the gap by taking a drink of coffee.

Clyde went on, "I was just wonderin' if you knowed anything about public speakin'? If you could maybe give me a few pointers?"

"I took a few speech courses in college," Howard said. "I've got an idea what you're supposed to do. If you can do it."

"Oh, I can do it," Clyde said confidently. "I just need to know how to get started. I thought about startin' off with a travelin' salesman joke. You know—something about the travelin' salesman and the farmer's daughter. Would that be okay?"

"Yes, I guess that would be all right." Howard didn't sound too positive. "What's the point the speech makes?"

"Oh, I don't know as it's gonna actually make a point. I'm just gonna tell 'em some things have happened to me out on the road." Clyde's manner dismissed Howard's question as irrelevant. He returned to something more important. "There wouldn't be anything wrong about startin' off with a joke, would there?" Clyde was anxious. "I wantta do the right thing. I mean it's okay to start with a joke if you want to?"

"Sure, it's all right," Howard said. He looked speculatively

at Clyde. "Of course, humor's not always easy to handle. You have to know your audience."

"I know my audience," Clyde said. "I know just how much they'll take."

"The main thing is to get your thoughts organized so you know what you're going to say," Howard advised.

"Oh, don't you worry about that," Clyde assured. "I can talk all night if I can just get started." Then a brief moment of indecision. "I was wonderin' how to break it off though. I was kind-a thinkin' about another joke."

"Another joke?"

"Yeah," Clyde said eagerly. "I know a lulu about a travelin' salesman and a fan dancer."

"You might wait and see how they take the first one about the farmer's daughter," Howard suggested.

Clyde looked disappointed. "Yeah, I suppose so," he agreed. "Then I just say thank you and sit down. Is that it?"

Howard shook his head. "According to the books you don't need to say thank you. I guess the idea is that if you've been standing up entertaining them for an hour, they're the ones should be thanking you."

Clyde was confused. "Judge Wickard always says thank you," he said doubtfully.

"It's not too important," Howard said. "You could say it or not. Just however you feel about it."

"Well, thanks for tryin' to help," Clyde said as if not much had been accomplished. He turned to Alan. "I reckon we better be gettin' in, Alan. Mommie'll be mad."

"Good luck with the speech," Howard said.

"Oh, it'll go over!" Clyde's former uncertainty, now logged with assurance, sank under an incoming tide of self-confidence. "You'll have to let me take a look at your novel when it's finished. Maybe I can give you some ideas. I always figured I'd write a book myself sometime."

Clyde and Alan were nearly to the door.

"Are you coming up tonight, Alan?" Howard asked. "I'd like to see what you think about a coupla new chapters."

"Not tonight," Alan said without looking at Howard or slowing his movement toward the door. "Maybe I'll come up sometime next week."

"When?" Howard asked.

"Oh, maybe Monday," Alan said. "Or Tuesday. I don't know."

Grace Peerman's face was anxious hostess to forty-five demanding years that had not been kind to her. There were premature, gray streaks in her brown hair, and her face had shadows that seemed to come from a sorrow that overflowed her eyes and spread out to stain the surrounding skin.

"What'd you do? Wait up town and ride home with him?" she asked Alan.

"Yes," Alan said.

"Why didn't you phone one of the neighbors and let me know?"

Her voice was complaining, and Alan felt guilty.

Clyde, carrying his suitcase, was right behind Alan. "Well! There's Mommie!" His tone was bantering.

"Where you been?" Grace demanded. "I've had supper ready for half an hour."

"Can't eat any supper tonight, Mommie." Clyde set the suitcase on a chair. "I'm makin' a speech for the Chamber of Commerce."

Grace was surprised. "The Chamber of Commerce?"

"Sho, Mommie! Sho!" Clyde's banter mimicked the elation of a small boy. It was the way Alan had talked when he was three years old. Clyde had imitated him at the time because it was cute and never gave it up. "Me gotta be there in forty-five minutes."

"How come they want *you* to speak?"

Her unmistakable inflection caused Clyde to drop his baby talk. "Walter Sholty's the chairman. He asked me a

while ago if I'd make them a talk tonight, and I told him I would." He spoke with exaggerated patience now as if she were the small child and he was explaining something to her.

"But you never made a speech in your life," she said.

Clyde laughed. "I make speeches all the time, Mommie. Ever' time I go to sell a furnace. If I didn't know how to talk, we wouldn't have anything to eat. Did you ever think of that?"

"How about all this stuff I got cooked up?" Grace indicated some pans sitting on the stove.

"Now don't fuss with your boys, Mommie." Clyde's bantering tone was back. "You know how boys are." Clyde's words arrayed himself and Alan on one side and Grace on a side opposing them.

"Well, you set down, Alan," Grace said. "We'll eat by ourselves again."

The "again" was a not-too-subtle reminder of the hundreds of meals that the two of them had eaten alone. Sometimes Alan wondered how it would be if it were Clyde with whom she ate alone night after night. Would she miss Alan then as much as she missed his father now?

"I want Alan to go with me," Clyde said. "You go put on some clothes, Alan. You can eat at Belle's."

"Whatta you want him along for?" Grace demanded.

"I want him to kinda listen and see what they say about my speech." Clyde turned to Alan. "I'll have Walt fix it up so you can set right at the table with the rest of us."

"Aw, I don't wantta go down there and eat supper with a bunch of storekeepers like that," Alan said.

"Now what's wrong with eatin' supper with the Chamber of Commerce?" Clyde demanded. "They're the most important people in town."

"Yeah, but I don't want to," Alan said.

"Well, I don't care if you want to or not," Clyde said. "I want you to, and as long as you live in my house, you'll

do what I tell you. I wantta know what they've got to say about my speech."

"Can't you hear what they've got to say about your speech without Alan?" Grace said.

"Why is it I gotta always be fightin' to keep from gettin' run over in my own house?" Clyde demanded like one who has been goaded past endurance. "There's no one hates to be yow-yowed at any more than I do."

"Yes, as long as you can have your own way about everything," Grace declared.

Clyde ignored the charge as one beneath his notice. He pointed a stern finger at Alan. "Alan, you go get some other clothes on."

Alan started out, and Clyde picked up his suitcase. "I got any white shirts?" he asked in the mollified voice of one who has had his way despite great odds.

"In the dresser drawer," Grace said, and Clyde left the kitchen behind Alan.

In his room, Alan ran a brush over his crew-cut a few times and dressed slowly. He didn't want to go to the Chamber of Commerce dinner. He knew it was just a bunch of the business men around town, and one by one they were okay. But the minute you got them all together, dressed up and smoking cigars and wearing big badges that said VAROO CHAMBER OF COMMERCE, they were sure hard to take. It was like everyone had to prove he was having a good time or they'd tear up his membership card. They would probably kid all night about the trestle swinging. If they were to talk to him about it one at a time on the street or someplace, they would shake their heads and give him fatherly advice about taking fool chances. But put them all together and pin a big VAROO CHAMBER OF COMMERCE badge on the lapel of their double-breasted suits, and they'd try to make it into a big joke, if they possibly could. Maybe if everyone had enough fun out of the thing, his father would realize he wasn't expected to be

mad about it any longer, and then Alan could ask him for the car tomorrow night.

He put on his favorite sport shirt, one that laced up the front, and his best gray pants and went back to the kitchen. Grace was sitting slumped over at the table, her lonely figure engulfed by the old-fashioned, high-ceilinged kitchen with its papered walls and bare floor that showed on four sides of the linoleum rug. Her elbows were on the table, and she was staring fixedly at three empty, white plates that stared unblinkingly back. Alan wanted to say something to her, but the dejected curve of her back made words impossible. He might have patted her on the shoulder, but he would have felt stupid doing that.

He leaned against the shallow, flat sink, that was wainscoted in around the bottom, and waited for Clyde. He didn't feel like sitting down.

Clyde appeared, fresh shaven and smelling strongly of after shaving lotion. He was wearing a white shirt with green tie and a blue suit with extreme presses in sleeves and legs. "Now whatta you wantta set there that way for?" he demanded of Grace.

"What way?"

"Like you've just lost your last friend in the world. What enjoyment you think it is for me to come home when you go around like a sick cat all the time?"

Grace took her elbows off the table and straightened up. "How'd things go this week?" she asked.

"About a hundred and fifty," Clyde said. "You ready, Alan?"

Alan nodded.

"Can we get that television set tomorrow?" Grace asked.

"No, we can't get a television set! I got a car payment to make this week."

"That's sixty dollars. Whatta you gonna do with the rest of it?"

"I got plenty places to put it," Clyde said.

"Yes, I'll just bet you have!" Grace's resignation was gone. Her voice was accusing. "You prob'ly gotta pay a hotel bill for some woman you had with you all week!"

"There you go yow-yowin' again! Talkin' about something you don't know a thing about!"

"I know all right! You don't need to think you're foolin' anybody! I know you've got some woman ridin' around with you all the time you're out!"

"Well, if you wanna think so, you go right ahead! You will anyway, and it won't make a bit of difference what I say."

"How come that ornery Lindley girl's never home any more?"

"What the hell do I know about the ornery Lindley girl?"

"She's never home because you got her out ridin' around with you all the time, that's why! In the car I oughtta be ridin' in! The nasty, ornery, little whore! She's young enough to be your daughter!"

"Rave on! Make a goddam fool out of yourself! I wish to hell I'd come home once, and you had laryngitis!"

"You've always got plenty money to spend on yourself, hain't you? Or to show off up at Walter Sholty's filling station or someplace! But when it comes to spending a little of it on your family like other men, that's a different story!"

"I wish to hell you'd married some of them 'other men' you're always yow-yowin' about."

It was an indecisive skirmish, as Alan had come to reckon his parents' many brushes, and Grace appeared to consider it so too. She drew a new line of battle elsewhere. "I thought maybe we could all three go to church tonight. Together. Like a family should."

Clyde met the new attack with a feint. "Church? On Friday night?"

"They're havin' a meeting."

"They're always havin' a meeting."

"Yes, and you're always goin' off to Walter Sholty's or someplace else instead of tryin' to save your soul."

"Where I go is my own business. No one else's."

"You'll think your own business! When your soul's roastin' in hell with Walter Sholty on one side of you and Lorraine Lindley on the other." Grace seemed to derive satisfaction from the prospect. Her voice rang with righteous conviction.

It was a telling thrust, but Clyde mustered what defense he could. "I'll go to church when they get a preacher I can listen to without feelin' like a little kid."

Grace rushed the opening triumphantly. "All men are children to the Lord!"

"Well, that sonofabitch hain't the Lord—yet!"

"Do you mean Brother Guinnip?"

"Yes, I mean Brother Guinnip! If it takes that sonofabitch to throw open the gates of heaven, I'll slip under the fence someplace."

"You can do what you want to with your own wicked, black soul," Grace declared. "But what about Alan's? What about your son?"

"What about Alan?"

"Do you know when's the last time he's been inside that church?"

"No."

"It's been over a year. I used to *make* him go to church and Sunday school. Whether he wanted to or not. I did *my* part. But now he's too big to make. And you know whose fault it is? It's *yours*! He don't go to church because his father never went!"

"That's a goddam liel" Clyde shouted indignantly. "I used to go to church all the time. Until they started gettin' in these asinine two-faced preachers from all over."

"Squirm out of it!" Grace's voice was terrible in its awful triumph. "Squirm and sweat! But when Alan's soul is roasting in hell along with yours, don't forget it was you that put him there! *You* know it! And the Lord knows it!"

Clyde was regaining his lost aplomb rapidly. "Alan's soul is his own. He'll have to live with it the best way he can. Just like everyone else. And as far as *my* soul's concerned, I'm just the way the Lord made me. And he's goin' to consider all that on the judgment day." Clyde's voice picked up impetus as he went along. "Whatta you think they call it judgment day for? Because man's going to be *judged*. Judged according to what he's done and what made him do it. I'm nothin' the Lord didn't intend for me to be. I don't gamble. I don't get drunk. I don't nag at you. All in God's world I ever do is play around once in awhile. And that's because the good Lord made me that way. I can't resist a good-lookin' woman any more than some men can turn down a drink. You know that. I'm a ladies' man, and I can't help it. Any man that's really a *man* is . . ."

It would be a long speech. Alan had heard it many times. Always worded in a slightly different context to fit the particular set of circumstances under which it was delivered, its intent was always the same: to make a recruit of the Lord out of Clyde A. Peerman, who marched along dutifully under His banner, even if the feet did become stained and muddy, due, of course, to the terrain over which He chose to lead the way. It was a creed. A creed that repetition had endowed with a fervor that went beyond the concept of mere justification. In Clyde's mind it was the story of Creation itself. Alan understood that.

Grace's footing with the Lord was more tenuous. Ever since Alan could remember, his parents had quarreled over Clyde's never-ending succession of "old whores." The more violent the quarreling became, the more fervently Grace embraced her religion and the more righteous became her mien. At such times churchgoing and prayer seemed to be her complete existence. For a whole week one summer Alan had known of her attending special services in her church every night and then hurrying from there to be present for

the closing minutes of a big revival meeting being conducted in a tent on the edge of town. In the brief periods between Clyde's amours, Grace's religion suffered, and there were times when it all but flickered out. It was as if her salvation depended upon Clyde's perfidy in much the same way that pasture grass draws vitality from the manure with which it is spotted.

Sporadic as it was, Grace's religion had been the cause of much discomfort to Alan. Up to the time he was thirteen, he had permitted himself to be bundled off to Sunday school and church without protest. He didn't mind going—which wasn't to say that he enjoyed it—and sometimes a point would come up in a Sunday school lesson that he actually found intriguing. He thought about religion outside the church, too, probably more than anyone would ever suspect. As far as he was concerned, religion required a lot of thought in order to get it all straightened out in his mind. It was very perplexing, and up to the time he was thirteen, Alan tried faithfully to worry the whole thing through. And then the year he was thirteen, he suddenly stopped going to church and would never have gone again if Grace hadn't forced him into it. Even then he went under the greatest protest, and once even ran away from home because of it and was gone two days before the state police came bringing him back. Grace was completely mystified at Alan's abrupt switch from his former passivity in regard to churchgoing and prayed for him in the fits of fervency that accompanied Clyde's marital transgressions. Alan never did tell anyone that the reason for his sudden disaffection was Brother Phillcrest. That was a secret that wild horses couldn't have dragged from him.

Brother Phillcrest was a personable young man who came to Varoo to take over as pastor of Grace's church the year Brother Bainbridge was transferred to Kentucky. Grace had liked Brother Phillcrest immediately. He was such a good

family man and had such a nice young wife and baby. When he suggested, at the end of the third month, that he would like to have Alan for his altar boy, Grace was overjoyed.

It was the duty of the altar boy to light the candles at the beginning of a service and to extinguish them when the service was concluded. There was a formal procedure to be observed in this ritual, and it was necessary that Alan and Brother Phillcrest meet in the church one weekday night for Allan's instruction.

The period of instruction had been brief, and then Brother Phillcrest invited Alan into his church study for a cup of tea.

"I don't like tea," Alan had said with his typical thirteen-year-old bluntness.

"Would you have any objections to coming in while I have a cup?" Brother Phillcrest had pressed his invitation.

So Alan went in, and Brother Phillcrest plugged in an electric coffee maker to heat some water, keeping up a flow of inconsequential talk as he did so. Alan sat on a sofa against one wall and watched and listened and occasionally gave a short answer when Brother Phillcrest's talk took the form of a direct question. Alan tried later to recall how the conversation got onto the topic of girls, but he never was quite able to figure it out. The first thing Alan could remember about it was when Brother Phillcrest said, "I guess you're about the age now, Alan, when you're beginning to think things about girls, aren't you?"

Alan was embarrassed. He didn't know what to say. He said, "Oh, a little, I guess."

"It's nothing to be ashamed of," Brother Phillcrest said. "All boys begin to think of girls when they're about your age. It's sort of a built in instinct that nature has provided to be sure the human race keeps going. I guess you know how we get babies, don't you?"

It was all very casual. Brother Phillcrest wasn't even looking at him at the time. "We had a little about it in health class at school," Alan mumbled.

Brother Phillcrest laughed. "And you've talked about it with the other boys, I imagine."

Alan felt his face burn all the way up into the roots of his hair. "We don't talk about it outside class," he managed to say.

Brother Phillcrest's laugh was derisive. "Who do you think you're kidding, Alan? I was a boy myself just before I got to be a man."

He looked at Alan with a directness that Alan couldn't meet. He lowered his eyes in shame.

Brother Phillcrest's manner became very grave. "I see you've been thinking about it quite a bit. I was afraid of that."

The solemnity of the voice and the horrible church silence that followed it made Alan shrink into the sofa until there seemed danger that the cushions might smother him. But he couldn't have moved to save his life.

Brother Phillcrest started pacing nervously back and forth, talking in the manner of a doctor who discusses the prospects of a patient's recovery from some particularly serious ailment. "It's all a fine thing—a God-given blessing—when you're old enough to control yourself, Alan. But that won't be for a few years yet. And in the meantime you can get into some serious troubles with girls. You could make one of them have a baby. You know about that already. And you can catch horrible diseases from them. Do you know what venereal disease is?"

At this point Brother Phillcrest looked directly at Alan again, and Alan felt himself sink even deeper into the sofa. One leg tingled as if it were going to sleep, but he was powerless to move it into another position.

Brother Phillcrest came close and sat on the edge of the sofa beside him. His voice indicated that he had made an important decision. "There's just one thing to do when a boy's the age you are, Alan. And he can't do it by himself. He has to have help from some older person. Someone

that understands what it's like to be a boy with all the problems a boy has to face when he's your age. That's one thing I can do for you, Alan, as your minister. I'm going to help you through this phase you're in so you can live a good clean life." He took Alan's chin and turned his head to look directly into his face. Brother Phillcrest's hand on Alan's chin trembled. His voice was husky. "Do you want me to?"

Alan was hypnotized by the intent stare. He couldn't have spoken. He nodded his head penitently. Brother Phillcrest crossed the room, flicked the wall switch, and was back to the sofa instantly. Alan felt the man's hands on him in the darkness, pushing him over, scooting his body into full length on the sofa.

"Just lie still, Alan," Brother Phillcrest said soothingly. "And don't be frightened. Nothing's going to hurt you."

He felt the trembling hands at the fly of his trousers that Grace had pressed so carefully just before sending him out to become an altar boy, and he lay still, too frightened and amazed at the thing that was happening to move. In the darkness he heard the water in the coffee maker start to boil and heard the automatic switch snap off.

When Brother Phillcrest was finished, he refastened Alan's clothes and switched the light back on. Alan moved of his own volition for the first time since the lights had gone out. He stood up quickly, shoving his shirt tail down inside the top of his pants.

Brother Phillcrest faced him solemnly. His slick black hair was mussed, and one side of his clip-on bow tie had pulled loose. "I hope you realize that what happened was for your own good, Alan," he said. "But I hope you also realize that some people might not understand that. You asked me to help you, you know, and I was glad to do it. But people can be extremely narrow about this sort of thing. I think it would be best if you never mention what happened here to anyone, none of your friends, your parents,

no one at all. You don't tell them what I did for you, and I won't tell them that you asked me to do it. Do you understand?"

Alan nodded. "I won't tell," he said, and he never did.

Shortly afterward, Alan began begging his mother to let him stay home from church. But Grace wouldn't hear of it, and for weeks Alan went reluctantly into the house of the Lord every Sunday to light the candles and perform the duties of altar boy, trembling every time Brother Phillcrest looked at him. Then Grace confided to Brother Phillcrest that she had hopes Alan would enter the ministry when he grew up, and Brother Phillcrest graciously consented to give a portion of his evenings over to special religious instruction for the boy he said he had come to look upon almost as his own son.

That was when Alan had run away from home for two days. He even thought about suicide, but in the end Grace and the state police had prevailed, and the time came when Alan found himself closeted in the church study alone again with Brother Phillcrest.

The next few months were a nightmare in Alan's memory, a nightmare that in the daytime made him shudder with loathing and revulsion at the mere sight or mention of the church, and a nightmare that waked him at night trembling and perspiring.

Then Alan began to notice a curious change in himself. The tremor of revulsion that had run over his body at first whenever Brother Phillcrest suggested that such and such a night would be a good time for another lesson began to take on a disconcerting new quality of excitement. The night even came when Alan knocked with strangely trembling hand on Brother Phillcrest's study door and suggested himself that it was time for another lesson. Brother Phillcrest had laughed derisively and held the door open for Alan to come in.

When Brother Phillcrest was transferred to Missouri less than a year after his arrival in Varoo, Alan was relieved to

see him go. Brother Guinnip, his successor, was willing to keep Alan on as altar boy, but Alan had objected so violently that Grace finally let him have his way. For one thing, Alan was so much bigger at fourteen than he had been at thirteen. And for another thing, Brother Phillcrest's transfer came at a period between amours for Clyde, and Grace's religious fervor was at a correspondingly low ebb. Aided by the blight that his father's longer-than-usual period of fidelity placed upon Grace's religious zeal, Alan had so far loosened her grasp by the time of Clyde's next transgression that she never again succeeded in getting Alan back to church more than half a dozen times.

". . . I'm as good to my family as any man in the world. I take good care of you and Alan." Clyde was pacing back and forth in the kitchen, still enumerating his virtues. "I give you money every week when I come home. All the money you need to keep this place runnin'. Besides lettin' you keep everything you get from that apartment over the garage—"

"Yes, to buy groceries!" Grace flung at him, interrupting.

But Clyde's speech of The Creation had magically restored his good humor just as it always did. The angry tenseness was gone from his body. His voice became playful again. He crossed to Grace's side.

"Hain't you glad you got a *real* man, Mommie?" He took her hand away from her face so he could see her expression. "Really now, tell the truth. Hain't you glad your man's *all* man?"

Grace jerked her arm loose and shook her body violently to dislodge a hand Clyde had placed on her shoulder. "Don't you touch me! You filthy, nasty thing, you!"

"Come on, Alan," Clyde said in his bantering, good-natured voice. "Let's go. Mommie mad."

Those who heard Clyde's speech at the Chamber of Com-

merce dinner referred to it afterward as a "Whing-Ding," and Walter Sholty called it a "Lollypaloozer." Clyde beamed. His opening remark was, "As I stand here before you, I'm reminded of the little story about a travelin' salesman and a farmer's daughter. It seems that this travelin' salesman was travelin' through the country one night, and—" The speech ran thirty minutes overtime and closed with another little story which Clyde said he was reminded of, this one about a traveling salesman and a fan dancer, after which Clyde said, "I thank you very much," and sat down.

Alan sat at a far end of the long U-shaped table and ate a tasteless dinner of meat loaf and green peas and heard his father talk. The men laughed a lot, usually when Clyde cued them into it by laughing first, but Alan didn't think it was very funny. That was probably because he was in no mood to hear a speech. Partly because everyone had worn the trestle swinging bit thin just as he had known they would. But mostly because he kept thinking of his mother sitting at the table in that big, bare kitchen. He could imagine her sitting by herself in the front room now listening to the radio. Or maybe she would go over to Currys' and watch television. Probably not though. She wouldn't want them to see she had been crying.

They had no sooner entered the car for the ride home than Clyde said eagerly, "Well, what'd you hear about the speech?"

"Not much," Alan said. "Just what they told you afterward."

"Didn't anyone say it was good or bad or anything like that?"

"I didn't hear anything. Except Tiff Edwards said you could talk all night if you wanted to."

"What'd he mean by that?"

"I don't know."

"Couldn't you tell the way he said it?"

"I think he just meant you're a good talker."

"He did?" Clyde chuckled. "Who'd he say it to?"

"Clarence Coker."

"What'd Coke say?"

"He said you'd rather talk than eat."

Clyde chuckled again. "And that's all you heard, is it?"

"Yes, that's all," Alan said.

At home, there was still the sound of a typewriter coming through a lighted window over the garage. The house was dark.

On the back porch, Clyde turned suddenly to Alan again. "How did Tiff Edwards say that?" he demanded.

"About talking all night?"

"Yes. What words did he use?"

"He said, 'That sonofabitch could talk all night if he wanted to'."

Clyde chuckled. "He said sonofabitch, did he?"

"Yes."

Clyde chuckled again. "That sonofabitch!" he said in tones of highest approval for Tiff Edwards.

CHAPTER FOUR

FOCAL POINT of public opinion was Vic Hamilton's poolroom. Here, amid six pool tables: two for "scratch", three for snooker, and one for billiards, as many of Varoo's male population as cared to avail themselves of it were offered entertainment, refreshment, comradeship, and an insidious kind of small-town culture. Culture was not lettered upon the plate glass window as available, but it was as indelibly

instilled within the minds and souls of Vic's patrons as occasional spots were chipped into Vic's plastered walls by the butt end of a too violently drawn back pool cue, and smutty humor was inscribed on the walls of Vic's backroom toilet by pencil or pencils unknown—unknown but greatly admired.

Truisms were pondered deeply at Vic's, and platitudes flourished with all the vigor of cultivated cabbages. It was here that practically every topic in the world of thought was probed as lightly as chipping paint, and clashes of opinion were settled by the application of standardized "truths" that had become as much a part of everyone's thinking as the multiplication table. Deviation from these accepted "truths" was called either unmanly, unamerican or, in certain tongue-in-cheek cases, unchristian—all according to the particular category in which the errant idea happened to fall. Possession of the unaccountable doctrine was blamed either on the unnatural tendencies of the individual experiencing such a visitation, or the breakdown of the public school system.

"What the hell do they want?" Vic was demanding when Alan went in one evening. "The shirts off our backs?"

"I tell you what they want. They want every damned thing they can lay their hands on."

"What gets me is the way the bastards come over here, take everything they can grab till they make a whole pot full of money, and then go back over there again to spend it."

"By-god, yes! If this is a good enough place for 'em to make their money, it's good enough place to spend it."

"That's better than these guys that come over here to get away from what they've got over there. Then when they get here, I'm damned if they don't start workin' to make this place just like it was back where they come from."

"Anyone that don't like this country like it is oughtta be put on a boat and shipped out!"

"You goddam right! If they like it so good over there, let 'em stay there."

"You'd oughtta seen 'em in the war. We'd be goin' through some crappy little place, and everyone in town'd line up to beg American soldiers for cigarettes or some damned thing. Even the men! And the kids!"

"And I suppose some damned fool'd give it to 'em!"

"Hell, yes! Cigarettes. Candy. C-rations. Anything they wanted."

"That's the trouble. American soldiers hain't nothin' but a bunch-a suckers."

"Well, hell, Americans are too soft-hearted. They'd give you any damned thing they got."

Alan found Robbie Hite practicing spot shots on the back table. He came up behind and grabbed Robbie by both arms, holding him so that he could not turn his head to see his assailant. Robbie began a good-humored swearing and kicked backward. Finally, Alan let loose, and Robbie turned around. He was Alan's age, thin, unhealthy looking, with a pinched face. Swollen eyelids appeared half-closed over eyes that were almost colorless, giving the face a vacuous, staring look. People said Robbie was feeble-minded. Some even went out of their way to tell Robbie himself. But Alan had read about feeble-mindedness in an encyclopedia at school just to find out, and he knew Robbie wasn't that. There was nothing actually wrong with his mind. He was just dull. And the condition had been aggravated over the years by the other kids and some of the adults too. At Vic's he was continually being made the butt of everyone's jokes, and among the patrons at Vic's, some of the jokes could be pretty raw. Like the time they passed a hat to take up a collection of eleven dollars and then gave the money to Robbie to let them watch him play with himself in the back room. Alan had tried to keep Robbie from doing it, but Robbie wanted the money. And then too he seemed to enjoy being the center of attention for a little while. Every-

one's interest in the thing he was doing made him feel important. He didn't seem to realize they were making a fool of him until it was all over, and then they made things so miserable for him with their crude teasing that he cried and didn't show his face anyplace around town for weeks afterward.

"I knowed who it was," Robbie declared, facing Alan triumphantly.

"Whatta you doing?" Alan asked.

"Shootin' spot shots. Watch this." Robbie put a ball into place and made ready to shoot at it.

"Whatta you doin' back there, Hite?" Vic called from the front.

"Practicin'," Robbie said.

"If you don't put that cue stick up, I'm gonna charge you fifteen cents," Vic threatened.

"Aw, bull!" Robbie was all set to shoot. "I hain't even got the light on."

"I don't care if you got the light on or not. You been foolin' around back there for fifteen minutes. Either play pool or put that cue stick back in the rack. I'm tryin' to make a livin' outta these tables."

Robbie shot and missed, sending the cue ball careening around the table.

"Did you hear me?" Vic called roughly.

"Yes, I heard you," Robbie shouted back. "You don't think I'm deaf, do you?" He started toward the rack fastened against one wall.

"Snap to," Jack Deno, playing at the next table, ordered Robbie. "Put that cue stick away."

Robbie had been about to hang up the cue, but now he turned to face Deno. "You go to hell!" he said fiercely.

Deno screwed his face up in an exaggerated expression of disbelief. "What did you say?" he demanded as if the impertinence of Robbie's utterance were almost beyond comprehension. He leaned his cue against the table and started

toward Robbie, a good-looking, well-built nineteen, but with an overbearing manner.

"I said you go to hell!" Robbie repeated wildly. "You don't have to tell me when to hang up a cue stick! This's not your pool room!"

"When did you get to be so tough?" Deno said in mock wonder. He was directly in front of Robbie now.

Robbie stood his ground. "What business is it of yours?" he demanded. His voice was shrill and tense.

Deno was enjoying himself. "Which you want first, Old Buddy," he said menacingly, "a broken arm, or a bloody nose?"

"You leave me alone!" Robbie shouted, looking sideways at Alan as if for help.

Alan was aware of Robbie's look. He had helped Robbie out of so many rough places that Robbie probably considered they were buddies. And Alan really liked Robbie, too. He liked Robbie considerably more than he did Jack Deno. Robbie would be all right if guys like Jack Deno would only let him be.

"I'll leave you alone!" Deno declared, suddenly stepping in beside Robbie and grabbing his right arm.

He gave a little jerk that turned the other's back to him and at the same time bent Robbie's arm up between his shoulders. The sudden pain caused Robbie to bend forward until the upper part of his body was parallel to the floor, his left arm hanging uselessly. The pool cue fell to the floor. Robbie swore volubly in a shrill voice and tried to move away from Deno. Deno followed along, retaining his hold on the arm and guiding Robbie's movement until his head touched the wall, and he could move no farther.

"I'll leave you alone once!" Deno said, and lifted his knee in a jarring blow to the bent-over boy's buttocks.

Robbie's head was jammed up against the wall with a force that caused his neck to bend.

Alan looked on anxiously.

"I'll leave you alone twice!" Deno said and lifted his knee in another blow.

Everyone in the place was watching now. There was no sound except the thud of Deno's knee and Robbie's swearing.

"And I'll leave you alone three times!" Deno said. He lifted his knee in a final powerful jar, and at the same time released his hold on the arm.

Robbie's head crunched against the wall and was immediately followed by the rest of his body, which struck with a solid impact.

Robbie straightened up. Tears in his eyes glinted evilly in the reflected light of a snooker table. His breath was coming in little half-gasps that sounded almost like sobs. He put a hand to the top of his head and brought it down with blood on his fingers.

"You made my head bleed!" His half-sobbed words sounded foolishly like a small boy's accusation.

"A half-wit like you's lucky to have a head—if that's what you call it," Deno said, turning back to his interrupted snooker game.

"You goddam sonofabitch you, Deno!" Robbie declared tearfully, still looking at the blood on his fingers.

Deno turned back. "Who's a sonofabitch?" he demanded softly. He started toward Robbie again.

Vic came running back. "What the hell you wantta do? Break his neck?" he demanded of Deno.

"You goddam right!" Deno declared.

"Leave him alone, you crazy fool!" Vic said, but it was more of an entreaty than an order.

Even so, Vic's opposition halted Deno. He glared the rest of the way to Robbie and bridged the gap with a warning. "Don't you ever call me a sonofabitch again," he said ominously. "No one talks about my mother like that."

"Then you stop callin' me a half-wit!"

"Why?" Deno demanded. "A half-wit's what you are!"

"Then you're a sonofabitch!" Robbie declared stoutly with all the finality of a reasoned out bit of logic.

Deno was on him instantly. Robbie saw him coming and clasped his hands on the back of his neck, letting both elbows protrude in front to protect his face. He bent over until his head nearly touched the floor, cursing shrilly. Deno brought up one knee in a vicious jab to Robbie's side. Robbie slammed up against the wall and slid to the floor, face down, his hands still protecting the back of his neck and still cursing.

Deno turned back to the snooker table, triumphant and excited. "That crazy bastard thinks just because he's feeble-minded he can get away with anything!" The righteousness in his voice was like a flag rippling. "I'll break his crappy neck next time!"

Still lying face down on the floor, Robbie uncovered the back of his neck and twisted his head around in Deno's direction. "I'll call you a goddam sonofabitch whenever I feel like it, you goddam sonofabitch!" he shouted.

Deno's head jerked. He threw his cue down on the green topped snooker table and started toward Robbie again. Robbie covered the back of his neck with both hands and put his face down against the tile floor.

"Leave him alone, Deno," Vic said. "You'll hurt him."

"You goddam right, I'll hurt him!" Deno declared.

"He's not really calling you a sonofabitch," Stanley Mack said. "He's just excited."

"I'll give the silly bastard something to be excited about," Deno said. He was nearly up to where Robbie lay.

Alan had seen Jack Deno angry before. At such times there was no reason in him. He was a bully, too, capable of almost anything. And Robbie was stubborn. Not strong enough to stand up to Deno, he would permit his arms to be broken before he would take back a word. Abruptly Alan knelt at the prostrate boy's side, the movement placing him

directly in Deno's path. He put a hand on Robbie's shoulder.

"Take it easy, Rob," he said. "You'll get hurt."

Robbie uncovered his neck and twisted his head to look up at Alan. The awkward position exposed angry red veins in his eyes. Tears were running off his chin. "Make him leave me alone then!"

Deno had halted uncertainly. To reach Robbie it would be necessary for him to get past Alan, who squatted on the floor beside Robbie, his back turned to Deno. Deno stood glaring. "I was just playin' with you," he shouted down at Robbie, "until you started callin' me names!"

"Playin' with me, hell!" Robbie sobbed hysterically. "You nearly twisted my arm off!"

"You want some more of it?"

Alan stood up and turned to face Deno. "He'll be okay, Deno, if you'll just let him be."

Deno glared into Alan's face. "How come he called me a sonofabitch?" he demanded.

"Because you called him a half-wit."

"Well, I'd a damned sight rather be called a half-wit than a sonofabitch."

"Okay. I guess you made up the difference, didn't you?" Alan said.

"How?"

"You made his head bleed."

"I'll make his goddam nose bleed!" Deno said.

He made a movement as if to go past Alan. Alan shifted his position.

Vic came up to them. "Now let's stop this fightin'," he said. He turned Deno back toward the snooker table. "Come on, Deno. Play snooker."

Deno permitted himself to be led back to his table, where Chris Herrendon stood waiting for the game to resume.

"It's your shot, Deno," Chris said.

Deno picked up the cue and gave the cue ball a savage poke. The ball jumped the table, struck the wall, chipped a

place out of the plaster, and clattered off across the floor. The other players turned back to their games. Conversation, briefly stilled, started up again.

Alan and Stanley Mack helped Robbie to his feet. His face was red and marked with tears. There were streaks where he had wiped at the tears with bloody fingers.

"Is he hurt?" Vic asked.

"His head's bleeding a little," Stanley said. "I don't think it's bad."

"Are you all right, Rob?" Vic asked.

Robbie made some kind of incoherent answer deep in his throat.

"You boys take him back and wash that blood off his face," Vic said to Alan and Stanley.

Back in the toilet, Alan wetted a paper towel at the chipped, discolored sink and applied it to a bruised spot on the crown of Robbie's head. Robbie winced.

"That hurt?" Alan asked.

Robbie didn't say anything.

"It's stopped bleeding anyway," Alan told him.

Stanley adjusted the flow of water and handed Robbie the bar of soap from its hollowed out place on the side of the sink. "Here, Rob, wash your face."

Robbie took the soap and started lathering it in his hands while he looked at his face in the mirror. "That goddam sonofabitch made my head bleed," he said as if explaining the presence of the bloody marks to Alan and Stanley.

"It'll be okay, Rob," Stanley said. "It's stopped bleeding now."

"I'll kill the sonofabitch!" Robbie promised fervently to his image in the mirror.

"He won't bother you any more, Rob," Alan said.

"He made my head bleed!" Robbie was still working the soap around furiously in his hands, apparently unaware of the huge billow of lather that he had already worked up.

"That's enough soap, Rob," Stanley said gently. "Come on, wash your face." He took the bar of soap and returned it to its place on the side of the sink.

Robbie lifted his soapy hands and splatted them against his face.

"Be careful of your eyes, Rob," Stanley said. "You'll get soap in them."

Robbie spread the suds about with jerky, uneven motions.

"That's enough, Rob," Alan said. He took Robbie's hands down from his face and held them under the stream of water.

Robbie's face was covered with soap suds spread unjudiciously from hair line to the end of his chin in a bubbly, white film broken only by two wide open staring eyes, red and lye inflamed. Tears streaming from them left a little, billowy wake down each cheek.

Robbie appeared not to notice. "I'll kill that sonofabitch!" he said again.

"Now wash the soap off your face," Alan said when Robbie's hands were clean.

Robbie sloshed water over his face with cupped hands, and the soap suds disappeared. Alan and Stanley each wiped at Robbie's face with paper towels.

"Okay, you look swell, Rob," Alan said, stepping back to inspect.

Robbie turned wordlessly and started out. Alan and Stanley followed him from the toilet into Vic's big, unused, back room, where Robbie headed for the back door that opened onto an alley.

"You wantta go back up front and play a game of snooker, Rob?" Stanley called.

Robbie made no answer. He went through the open doorway, where the yellow ooze of a street lamp held his thin body for a few seconds as if trying to push him back inside, and then he was gone from sight.

"You reckon he'll be all right?" Stanley asked Alan.

"Sure, he'll be all right," Alan said. "Why wouldn't he be?"

"His eyes must be stinging like hell, red as they are."

"They're not bothering Rob any. He didn't even notice it," Alan said, turning toward the front room. "Come on, let's play a game of snooker."

They played on the back table. The game was about half finished when Jack Deno and Tod Lofts came past on their way to the back room. Alan was standing by the wall waiting for Stanley to shoot. Deno stopped beside Alan and threw a comradely arm around his shoulders.

"How come you wanted to take that feeble-minded bastard's part a while ago, Al?" he asked.

"I don't know," Alan said, shifting his weight so that Deno's arm slid off his shoulders. "I kind-a feel sorry for him."

"Hain't no use feelin' sorry for a bastard like that," Deno said. "They're happy. Don't you know that?"

It was Alan's time to shoot, and the action gave him an opportunity to ignore Deno's question. There wasn't any actual enmity between the two of them. And Deno wasn't any worse than a lot of guys. But he was always so completely self-sufficient and without need for others that it made him seem sort of barren. Or shallow. Alan shot and straightened up. Deno was still standing there.

"Tod and me's goin' up to Nate's for a beer," Deno said. "Wanna come along?"

"Naw," Alan told him, "we're gonna play another game of snooker."

"I'm buyin'."

"Naw, Thanks anyway."

"Suit yourself," Deno said. "Come on, Tod."

The two went out, and Alan and Stanley finished their game. They had just started a second game when Robbie came through the back room doorway. His eyes were fiery red and looked swollen, but the tears were gone. He was blood streaked again where he had fingered his wound and

then dabbed at his face. A dirty streak of soap suds had dried all along the line of his chin. He paused beside the snooker table and peered toward the front of the room as if looking for someone.

"Hi, Rob," Stanley said. "You got back, huh?"

But Robbie gave no indication of hearing. He walked toward the front of the room staring into each face as he came to it: intent pool players, boisterous lookers-on who sat in high legged chairs along the walls and watched and shouted advice and talked to one another. All wound round and round with layers of blue and white tobacco smoke like wrapping paper.

"You think he's looking for Deno?" Stanley asked.

"Looks like it," Alan said.

"Deno'll beat hell out of him this time if he starts anything."

"He sure as hell will."

Robbie made a circuit of the room and came back to the rear table. "You know where Deno is?" he asked Alan. His voice was flat and without expression.

"I don't know, Rob." Alan looked quickly toward Stanley.

"Isn't he up there in front?"

Robbie shook his head.

"I suppose he went home," Alan said indifferently.

"I'm lookin' for 'im," Robbie said and started for the back door.

"Whatta you want Deno for?" Stanley asked.

"I just wanna see 'im a minute," Robbie said. He went through the doorway into the back room.

"He's gonna get in trouble," Stanley said to Alan.

"We better stop him." Alan lifted his voice and yelled toward the front: "Rack, Vic!"

Stanley added his voice. "Rack in the back!" He thumped his cue on the tile floor.

Vic came running, carrying a triangular rack for the balls.

"We just broke the balls and decided not to play," Stanley told him. "Is that okay?"

"How the hell come you decided not to play after you broke the balls?" Vic growled.

"We'll be back later," Stanley said. "Okay?"

"Okay," Vic said, corraling the balls roughly inside the rack. "But by-god, next time you break, I'm chargin' you whether you play or not."

Alan and Stanley had hung up their cues. "Thanks, Vic," Alan said, and they ran to catch Robbie.

They found him standing under a street light in the rough, brick alley, looking uncertainly toward the back door of Nate Pendleton's tavern.

"Whatta you doing here, Rob?" Alan said as if surprised to see him.

"I'm still lookin' for Deno," Robbie said.

"Whatta you want Deno for?"

"I just wanna see the sonofabitch a minute," Robbie said. His voice was jerky and strained.

"Whatta you going to do to him?" Stanley asked.

"I'm gonna shoot the bastard," Robbie said. "I got the gun to do it with too." He reached inside his shirt and brought out a long-barreled black revolver.

"Where'd you get that?" Alan asked.

"It's Dad's."

"He know you've got it?"

Robbie shook his head.

"Let's see." Alan held out his hand for the gun, making the whole thing as casual as he could.

Robbie handed it to him without hesitation.

"Say, that's a beaut!" Alan hefted the gun, testing its balance. He snapped open the cylinder. "You just got one shell, Rob," he said.

"That's all Dad's got."

"What if you miss him?"

"I won't miss."

"Deno's gone home now," Stanley said.

"How'd you know he went home?" The talk seemed to be quieting Robbie's nerves. His voice was steadier now.

"He said he was," Stanley told him.

"Where'd your dad get this gun?" Alan asked, aiming experimentally at a street light.

"He's had it a long time."

"It shoot straight?"

"Sure, it shoots straight."

"You figure on killing Deno?"

"Naw, maybe I'll just shoot him in the leg or something like that."

"He sure needs it all right."

"You goddam right he needs it! The top-a my head's sorer'n hell."

"Yeah, I'll bet it is." There was deep concern in Alan's voice. "The only thing is a bastard like Deno's not worth shooting."

"Why not?"

"Well, if you just shoot him in the leg, he'll come looking for you soon as he's able to get around again."

Robbie remained thoughtfully silent.

"And after that the only thing you can do to protect yourself is go ahead and kill him," Alan went on.

"Yeah, I guess so," Robbie said.

"And that's how come I say a guy like Deno's not worth the trouble." Alan was talking casually while he aimed the gun at various objects around the alley. "'Cause when you kill him, they'll hang you."

There was a long silence. The click of pool balls came from Vic's back door. The odor of beer came from Nate's. From out on the street came the sound of someone laughing, and a dog way off someplace barked back.

"What'd you do, Al, if you was me?" Robbie said, and he sounded like a very small boy asking someone to tell him the truth about Santa Claus.

"I'd just let him go," Alan said. "I'd keep out of his way if I was you and not have a thing to do with him. That's how I treat him. How about you, Stan?"

"Yeah, that's the way I do him," Stanley said. "No one likes him."

Robbie's red eyes squinted, and his face wrinkled in deep thought. Alan had seen Robbie do deep thinking before. It always reminded him of a television commercial about an engine that has sludge in it.

"I tell you what I think I'll do," Robbie said finally. "I'm just gonna let 'im go to hell. I'm not gonna get in a jam over a bastard like that."

"That's what I'd do, Rob," Alan said, handing the gun back. "Of course, it's up to you. He sure needs to be shot."

Robbie took the gun. "I'll just keep this gun where I can get to it," he said. "And I'll leave him alone as long as he leaves me alone. But if he ever lays a finger on me again, I'll kill 'im!" A little muscle in his face twitched and kept twitching.

"You gonna take the gun home now?" Alan asked.

"Why?"

"I thought we could play a game of snooker. Three-handed."

"Yeah, let's do," Stanley said.

"Okay," Robbie said. "I better take this gun home though."

"We'll be in at Vic's," Alan said.

"Okay." Robbie turned away and started down the alley at a trot.

Alan and Stanley watched him go.

"You think he really would-a shot Deno?" Stanley said.

"I don't know," Alan said. "But if Deno's got any sense, he better never pick on him any more."

CHAPTER FIVE

"IT DON'T make any difference what you do. When your time comes to go, you'll go!"

"Aw, bull! Are you tryin' to say everything's figured out ahead of time and set down in a big book someplace?"

"I know damned well it is!"

"I suppose you think when you're born it's all decided right then who you're gonna marry and how many kids you're gonna have and just when you're gonna die and everything about it."

"It sure as hell is!"

"Bull!"

"All right, if it hain't all figured out ahead of time, how come two guys can be in a wreck together, both in the same car, and the car be all tore to hell, and one guy gets killed, and the other one comes out of it without gettin' a scratch on 'im? It's because the one poor bastard's time was up, and the other one's wasn't. When his time does come, he'll get it even if he's settin' at home in a rockin' chair. If nothin' else a lump-a plaster'll fall off-a the ceiling and kill 'im."

"Aw, bull! What a bunch-a crap! Do you really believe that kind-a stuff?"

"Okay, take some soldier that goes through the war without gettin' a scratch. And then the day he comes home and gets a discharge, he's run over by a car crossin' the street. How about that?"

"And I suppose if it's not your time, you can do anything you want to, and you won't get hurt?"

"Hell, no, you won't! Not if it's not your time."

"Then what the hell do they put brakes on cars for? Or chlorine in water?"

"Now you're just showin' your ignorance!"

"So what's ignorant about it? If it's not your time to go, you don't need brakes. Nothin's gonna happen to you."

"Yeah, but what about the other guy?"

"He's got a time to go too, hain't he?"

"Bull! There hain't no use talkin' to you. Your mind's made up."

"If you really believe that crap, I'll tell you how you can make a pot full-a money."

"How?"

"You can sell everyone a ticket to watch, and then you go up to the top of a ten-story building someplace and jump off. If nothin's supposed to happen to you that day, you won't be hurt any, and look at all the money you'll make."

"Sure, but I can't do that."

"How come you can't?"

"Because I'm not *supposed* to."

"How the hell you know you're not supposed to?"

"Because if I was *supposed* to, I'd know it."

Alan and Stanley Mack were playing snooker. "Will you guys shut up that yakking?" Stanley called at the contentious pair of overalled philosophers. "You neither one know a damned thing you're talking about."

Alan supposed that Stanley Mack was his best friend. They had known each other ever since the fourth grade. They had gone to Sunday school together, joined the boy scouts together, gone to the same birthday parties, bought suits and topcoats alike, and started dating at the same time. As a matter of fact, their first date had been a foursome affair at which they took a couple of girls to a movie. That had been in junior. Now they were both seniors in high school.

When they were fifteen they had had their first sexual experience, both in bed at the same time with a very loose, young girl about their age, who was visiting for a week next door to Stanley's house. When it was all over, Alan had confided to Stanley that in his opinion the performance didn't quite come up to the advance billing it was always receiving down at Vic's. And Stanley had agreed. He seemed quite proud of the exploit, however, and wasn't long in letting everyone down at Vic's know what had happened, not too subtly either. Jack Deno, greatly impressed, called upon Alan for a blow by blow account, and Alan very frankly told those assembled that he thought the whole thing was a little overrated. He couldn't have raised a greater outcry if he had been denouncing the Constitution of the United States, and everyone called upon Stanley for his appraisal, whereupon Stanley reversed his earlier decision, professed overwhelming gratification, and was all but cheered for his endorsement. It made Alan look rather strange, and he was kidded about it for a long time.

Generally though, Stanley could be depended upon, and Alan confided in him more than anyone in the world. Even so, there were some things he had never mentioned to Stanley. His experience with Brother Phillcrest, for instance. But that was something Alan had deliberately canceled from his mind. He just pretended it had never happened; so, of course, there wasn't anything to tell anyway. He had never mentioned his desire to be a writer either. Not that he was afraid Stanley would tell anyone or laugh at him. Stanley was always having crackpot ideas too. But writers seemed like people who lived in another world, and Stanley was too well-grounded in this one to really understand. When Alan thought about it, he was a little amused. He could tell Stanley the most intimate details about what should have been the most intimate matters, except those times with Brother Phillcrest, but he never had the nerve to confide in him about wanting to be a writer. Up to the time Howard Stirche came to town,

he had never confided that to anyone. When the desire grew inside him until he felt he would burst, he used to lock himself in his room and say what he had to say with his mouth muffled against a pillow. He pretended he was talking to God. Like praying.

Alan and Stanley had been playing snooker for a couple hours when Jack Deno and Tod Lofts entered the front door. Each carried a metal fishing tackle box.

"Ketch Martin been here?" Deno asked Vic.

"Not since noon," Vic said. "He was in here at noon for a package of cigarettes."

"He was supposed to pick up Tod and me to go fishin'," Deno said.

"Well, hell, Ketch works till five o'clock, don't he?" Vic said.

"What time is it?"

"About four-thirty."

Vic's pool room had at some time in its long career been a restaurant. The front two-thirds of the building had been the dining room, and the kitchen had occupied the rear. All that Vic used the rear third for now was the toilet, which occupied one partitioned off corner. The rest of the space was a wasteland: empty paper cartons, a few warped pool cues, a broken rack, an old iron stove, and here and there a discarded display sign showing a beautiful model in a bright bathing suit smiling her provocative smile and holding an enticing package of chewing tobacco up above the dust and litter that surrounded her. Vic called the back room his graveyard for old whores.

The rear door, that opened onto an alley, was kept open as much as possible in the summer time to admit air as well as a frequent customer who might find it more convenient to come in that way. The door between the rear room and the front was ordinarily kept closed.

Just now, however, this door between the two rooms was open, and a little, brown dog passed stealthily through it to

the front room. He was a dejected, beaten little mongrel without a friend in the world but intent upon making one. His tail was going furiously even if his head was hung in shame-faced realization that he was committing an illegal act.

"There's that dog again," Vic growled.

He ran at the dog clapping his hands and stamping his feet. The dog turned with a frightened little yelp and scampered into the back room. Vic pulled the door shut.

"I gotta get a spring for this door," he said. "That's the third time today I've had to chase that little mutt outta here."

"Why don't you let him stay, Vic?" Stanley said.

"Bull!" Vic declared. "I'm not havin' any dog around here to clean up after."

Deno was sitting in a chair along one wall, the tackle box on the floor at his feet. "Let me show you my new rod, Vic," he called.

Vic sat in the chair beside him, and Deno opened the tackle box. He fitted together the sections of a fishing rod and handed it toward Vic.

"Just feel the way that baby balances," he said.

But before Vic could take the rod, Sid Kile called, "Guess who's back, Vic?"

"Is it that goddam dog?" Vic demanded, turning to look.

The little brown dog stood just inside the door, which had come open again, his tail going back and forth in an unmistakable offer of friendship for anyone who might care to accept.

"You want me to get rid of him for you, Vic?" Deno said.

"If you can get rid of him, you're a better man than I am," Vic said.

Deno went close enough to the dog to reach him with the end of the rod. He freed the plug with its three hooks and let it out a few feet.

"You're not gonna hook him, are you?" Stanley Mack asked anxiously.

Deno didn't answer. He let the plug to the floor under the belly of the little, brown mongrel, who bent to sniff at it. Deno gave a jerk. The plug glanced off the dog's side, and he turned toward the back room with a little whimper. Deno whistled, and the dog turned in the doorway to look uncertainly back over his shoulder. Deno took a few steps closer and let the plug to the floor again.

"Naw, don't be hookin' 'im, Deno," Vic said. "He'll go out without that."

"Hook 'im in the flank," Cliff Maddox advised. "The skin's not so tough there. It'll go in."

Deno moved the plug under the dog's hind quarters.

"Don't be hooking that dog," Bart Richards said. "What's the matter with you?"

Deno gave a quick jerk. The dog yelped in pain and ran through the door. There was a whir of the reel in Deno's hands, and the line began to play out.

"Got 'im!" Deno yelled.

He stopped the reel, and the line stretched tight. The rod bent, and there was another yelp from the back room. Deno began to reel in. There was a series of sharp, piercing cries, one after another, and then the yelping dog appeared in the doorway, his hind quarters suspended in air and his front feet clawing at the tile floor in a futile effort to run the other way. Two hooks in the plug were struck through the dog's flank, pulling cruelly. Little spots of blood dripped to the floor. The dog's cries reverberated through the room.

Alan felt a nerve in his neck start to twitch. He swallowed to make it stop. His lips wrinkled involuntarily in a grimace. He pressed them against his teeth. Jack Deno always had to be picking on something or someone.

"Let him loose!" Stanley Mack shouted at Deno.

"Aw, shut up, will you?" Deno continued to reel the tortured dog toward him. "Play your snooker."

"That's a dogfish you got there, Deno," Tod Lofts shouted

happily. "You've heard of catfish, hain't you? Well, this's a dogfish."

"Turn that dog loose!" Vic commanded. "There hain't no sense doin' 'im that way."

"I'm gettin' 'im outta here for you, Vic," Deno said as if he were doing Vic a favor.

He went toward the back room, dragging the dog along at the end of the fishing rod, the dog crying out his pain and turning to bite at his flank.

"Look at him bite hisself!" Tod Lofts marvelled.

"You'd bite too, wouldn't you," Deno demanded, "if you had a fishhook stuck in your crotch?"

Loungers left their seats along the wall. Players threw their cues on the tables. All crowded through the back room to the alley behind Jack Deno and the little brown dog that had rolled over on his side and was being towed painfully along. Alan permitted himself to be pushed along with the others. Even Vic scooped the contents of the cash register into his pockets and came too.

"What you gonna do with 'im, Deno?" Chris Herrendon asked.

"I been wantin to test out this rod," Deno said. "See if it's any good."

He released the reel and permitted the line to slacken. Freed from the pull against his flank, the dog regained his feet and ran wildly up the alley, still mouthing his pain in shrill, piercing cries and trailing a little line of red spots behind. The reel in Deno's hands whirled as the line left it. When the dog was about fifty feet away, Deno put his thumb on the reel, and the line stretched taut. The running dog was stopped short. One of the hooks tore loose, leaving a hole that spurted blood, but the other hook settled in a firmer grip. Deno began to reel in. The rod bent almost double.

The dog's cries took on a new intensity. Alan heard them through a background of other noises that were unaccountably

sopped from nowhere, and all without the formality of passing through his ears. The horrible cacaphony permeated his body as moisture permeates blotting paper. His palms sweated, and he brushed them against his pant legs. Why didn't someone stop Deno? He would stop if Vic Hamilton or someone like that made him.

"You tore a hole in his leg, Denol" Stanley Mack shouted. "Let him loose."

Deno was too intent on what he was doing to answer.

"There's no use doing a dog that way!" Bart Richards said.

"Make him straighten up and fly right, Denol" Tod Lofts said.

"Keep your rod up, you're gonna lose 'im!" Cliff Maddox said.

Suddenly the figure of a man appeared at the upper end of the alley. He was running, an open bladed pocket knife in one hand. At about the middle of the gap, which had now narrowed to twenty feet between Deno and the dog, he grasped the fishing line and cut it in two. The terrified dog ran yelping up the alley with the hook still sticking in his flank and ten feet of fishing line trailing behind.

The man turned to face Deno, not more than ten feet away. It was Howard Stirche. The open-bladed knife was still in his hand, his feet spread wide apart. His face was white, as if all the color it normally carried had drained off into his eyes, making them bottomless pits of scalding color. Alan could even see a strange pulse beating in Howard's neck and felt an answering stir in his own.

"You oughtta have that hook stuck in you!" Howard said to Deno. His voice shook.

Deno stared dumbly at the knife in Howard's hand. The dog disappeared from sight at the upper end of the alley. His agonized cries faded.

"Anyone that'd do a dog that way should be stuck with a hook himself!" The horrible pits of color swept the little group that stood around Deno, splashing guilt wherever they

struck. Even those who had called upon Deno to stop were splattered. No one spoke. The transformation from helpless, little, brown dog to angry avenger had been too sudden.

Twice Howard's angry look swept them, and then the bottomless eyes blinked as if they had been held open too long. He shifted his feet, bringing them closer together. The rigidity went out of his stance. His look returned to Deno.

"You better put that knife away if you're not gonna use it," Deno said hoarsely.

Howard looked down at the knife as if unaware that he held it. He closed it wordlessly and put it into a pocket.

"That your dog?" Deno was recovering from the shock of Howard's unexpected appearance.

"No."

"Then whatta you so worked up about?"

"No dog ought to be treated like that!" Howard's voice was still shaky. "Why didn't some of you others stop him?"

He looked directly at Alan when he said it, and Alan felt his face burn.

"It wasn't their dog either," Deno said. "And they figured it wasn't any of their business."

Howard met Deno's look for several seconds in silence. Then his gaze dropped. He turned abruptly and started to walk away.

"Wait a minute, fella," Deno called.

Howard turned.

"What about that fishin' line?" Deno asked.

"What fishing line?"

"The one you cut. Who's gonna pay for it?"

Howard didn't answer.

"That was a brand new line and plug. Cost me five bucks."

Howard turned his back and started again to walk away.

Deno handed his fishing rod to Tod Lofts and ran to get ahead of Howard, blocking his path. "Who's gonna pay for that fishin' line?" he repeated.

There was a short hesitation while each stared fixedly

into the eyes of the other. Then Howard's look wavered, and he reached for his wallet. "I'll pay you for it just to keep from having trouble with you." He held a bill out to Deno.

Deno sneered. "Keep it, Roy Rogers," he said. "I just wanted to see if you would."

Howard's pale face grew red.

"What was that you said a while ago?" Deno was beginning to enjoy the situation. "That I oughtta have a hook stuck in me?"

"Yes!" Howard seemed nervous. "Then you'd know how it feels."

"I tell you what I'll do," Deno said. "I'm gonna give you a chance to stick a hook in me. I'll take my rod, and you take Tod's. We'll stand thirty feet apart and see which one does the hookin'. Whatta you say?"

"Get out of my way!"

Deno didn't move. "What's the matter, Gene Autry? No guts?"

The lookers-on had watched silently. Now Vic spoke up. "Leave him alone, Deno."

"I'll play hell leavin' 'im alone!" Deno's voice rose harshly. "The sonofabitch ruined a good fishin' line for me, besides threatenin' to stick me with a hook. Now let 'im go ahead and do it." He spoke to Tod Lofts. "Go put a new plug on my line. There's one in my tackle box. And bring out your rod for Roy Rogers here."

Tod disappeared eagerly through the pool room doorway, taking Deno's fishing rod with him.

"I'm not going to brawl with you," Howard said. He started to walk past Deno.

Deno stepped into his path again. "Where you goin', Roy Rogers?"

"If you touch me, I'll have you arrested!" Howard declared unsteadily.

"You're yella!"

Howard remained silent.

"You're a stuck up, yella coward!" Deno charged.

Alan watched Howard's fists clench and hoped he was going to hit Deno. But the fists unclenched again, and Howard's chin trembled. He clamped his teeth together.

"I thought you wanted to stick me with a hook!" Deno taunted. "Come on! Here's your chance! Stick me! If you're not yella, stick me!"

Deno was making Howard look ridiculous. Alan couldn't stand it any longer. He stepped out of the crowd. "I'll stick you, Deno, if you wantta be stuck so goddam bad!" he shouted.

Deno looked at him as if annoyed at the distraction.

Howard turned quickly. "You stay out of this, Alan!" he ordered.

"He wants to be stuck so bad, I'll stick him," Alan said.

"You mind your own business!" Deno shouted at Alan.

"Now who's yellow?" Alan made his voice as sneering as he could.

"All right, goddam you!" Deno whirled and walked over to an open space off the brick alleyway. "You're always stickin' your nose into something's none of your business! This's once you'll wish you'd kept your mouth shut!" With the toe of his shoe, Deno drew a block about three feet square in the dirt. "You stand there!" He moved thirty feet away and scratched out a second square. "I'll stand up here." He faced Alan. "You can't get out of your square. Whoever hooks the other one and reels him into the square where he's standin' wins. Okay?"

"Sure!" Alan said.

Howard grabbed Alan's arm. "Don't be a fool, Alan! You'll get an eye hooked out!"

Alan pushed Howard's hand away and moved over to stand in the square. He didn't really want to fight Deno; it was just that things had worked out that way. So much of what he did, he did because there was no help for it.

The crowd from the pool room moved in closer, forming

itself into a lane between the two squares. The torpor that had held them since Howard's appearance was gone, replaced by a strong surge of excitement.

"Hain't you got any sense?" Vic demanded of the two contenders, who stood facing each other. "You can get hurt real bad with a fish hook!"

"He asked for it!" Deno declared. "I'm gonna give it to 'im! Right through the nose!"

"You don't have to fight my battles for me, Alan!" Howard was pleading now. "I'd fight him if it were important enough! It's not important!"

Alan ignored the entreaty. He looked stonily at Deno thirty feet away at the end of the double line of excited spectators. Deno was confident and smug looking. His anger had disappeared in excited anticipation of the approaching duel.

"You're crazy, Al!" Stanley said. "Jack Deno's murder with that fishing rod. You never did much casting."

Tod Lofts came running up, a fishing rod in each hand. A new plug dangled at the end of Deno's line, its three barbed hooks shining dully. Deno took the rod and swished it experimentally a few times. The double row of spectators backed apart, making the lane wider. Tod gave the other rod to Alan.

"You ready?" Deno called.

"Yeah!" Alan let the plug on the end of his line out a few feet.

"Alan!" There was desperation in Howard's voice. "You don't have to do this! I can fight my own battles!"

"Get outta the way, Roy Rogers!" Deno called. He swished the rod through the air.

Howard stepped back hastily.

"Hook his ear, Deno!" Tod shouted.

"Watch the backlash, Al!" Stanley warned.

Deno drew his rod back and brought it forward in a casting motion. The plug had about twenty feet to travel from the end of the extended rod to the marked off square where

Alan stood. It fell short, and Deno began to reel in. he crowd pushed a step forward.

Alan cast in a circular motion. Deno squatted, and the plug passed harmlessly overhead. Alan let the casting motion carry through to prevent his line from fouling with Deno's. The crowd on that side pressed back. Alan began to reel in.

Deno stood up ready to cast again. Alan was reeling in and watching for Deno's plug at the same time. There was a whirr as Deno's line left the reel, and Alan saw the plug coming straight for him. He moved as far right as his marked off square would permit and bent outward from the waist. Deno flicked his wrist, and the plug changed course. The end hook caught at the short sleeve of Alan's sport shirt. Deno jerked. A flap that opened in the sleeve tore down to the end and was snatched away with the hook. Alan straightened up, his bare upper arm showing through the torn shirt sleeve. Both boys started to reel in. But backlash had caused Alan's line to tangle, and the reel wouldn't turn. He hastily began to pull the line free while he watched for Deno's next cast. His fingers trembled. His face hot.

Deno's plug came sailing at him again. Alan ducked it easily, and Deno began to reel in. Alan still worked desperately at his fouled line.

Deno's reel whirred again. This time it was a long cast that sent the plug behind Alan. Alan started to turn in that direction. He felt Deno's line fall on his shoulder and start to move forward against his neck. The plug would be following it!

Alan jerked away, and the line dropped from his shoulder to the upper part of his arm, where the shirt was torn. It was just a slight brush of the line against his arm that Alan felt, then it was a searing pain. At the same time, a tug on that side of his body pitched him forward into the dirt. He dropped his rod. The pain in his arm was excruciating. Almost of its own volition, the arm extended itself past his head in Deno's direction. Alan used the other hand to help

himself to one knee. Through a cloud of dust, he could see Deno reeling in the slack made by his movement. He started to rise, but Deno jerked, and the pain burned deeper. He could feel the flesh tear. He fell to both knees, and the pain in his arm was lessened.

Deno reeled in the slack, and the line tightened again. The pain became so intense that Alan was afraid he would faint. He moved forward on his knees to relax the taut line while Deno reeled in rapidly trying to keep it stretched tight. Alan moved across the space as rapidly as he could. There was no time to stand. On two knees and one hand, he hobbled in an awkward three point crawl, keeping the impaled arm stretched out in front as far as he could reach. He didn't regain his feet until he was almost up with Deno. The shortening gap between them made it necessary for Deno to hold the rod nearly straight up for the final few feet. When both boys finally stood in Deno's square, Alan's hooked arm was extended overhead toward the end of the rod.

Even as he had fallen, Alan was aware of the shouts of the crowd, now doubled in size, but the first distinguishable words he recognized were Deno's.

"Well, Big Shot," Deno said, holding the rod aloft so Alan had to stand facing him with arm overhead, "Whatta you say now?" His triumphant face was red and grinning.

Alan didn't trust his voice to answer. He could feel blood running down his armpit, and his arm throbbed as it had one time when the head of a match had embedded itself in the flesh and burned itself out. He felt weak. He was grateful when Stanley put an arm around his waist for support.

"Let him down, Deno!" Stanley ordered sharply.

Deno lowered the rod, and Alan's arm went down with it. It fell uselessly at his side. He could feel the blood reverse the direction of its flow and run off the end of his fingers. He was aware of Howard at his side, parting the torn sleeve, and he looked down at his wound. Two hooks of the plug were embedded in his arm about three inches

apart. The force of Deno's pull had cut a jagged gash behind each hook. The flesh was turned outward as if some inner force had caused it to erupt. Blood was flowing freely in a double stream. Alan felt nauseated. He looked away.

"Look what you did to him, Deno!" Stanley shouted accusingly.

Deno looked, and his triumphant smirk paled a bit, but his defense was ready. "It was either him or me," he declared righteously. "He wanted to do it."

"How you gonna get them hooks outta there?" Chris Herrendon asked in an awed voice.

"I'll take them out for you," Cliff Maddox offered.

Howard already had his pocket knife out. He cut the line six inches from the plug and put an arm around Alan's waist just above Stanley's. "Come on, Alan," he said. "We better get to the doctor's office right away."

"Can you walk?" Stanley asked.

Alan nodded his head.

The crowd opened a path, and the three of them went through, Alan in the middle with Howard and Stanley on each side. Howard pressed torn pieces of the arm together as they walked and held them in place with a clean, white handkerchief. The flow of blood lessened.

"You shouldn't a-done it, Al!" Stanley said when they were out of hearing of the crowd.

"I told you not to do it, Alan!" Howard said. "I don't care what a lout like that says about me! If I'd cared, I'd have fought him myself. You didn't have to get yourself all torn up on *my* account!"

"What makes you think it was for you?" It was the first thing Alan had said. His voice was shaky. "I did it for the dog!"

Howard recoiled, and the three of them faltered in mid-step for a second. Then they passed on. Howard bent forward as if to see into Alan's face.

But Alan kept his head down.

CHAPTER SIX

SATURDAY NIGHT brought forth the spirit of venturesomeness in Varoo. There was an atmosphere to Saturday night that was apparent at no other time, a curious excitement that broke surface like a strange fish and comported itself with an unaccountable recklessness, as if aware that on the stroke of midnight it would again be immersed for another week.

"Any man that can pass up a good-lookin' woman hain't really a man!"

"There's lots of 'em do it."

"Who? Name me a *real* man that ever passed up a woman if she was willin' to hold still for 'im. I mean a good-lookin' woman."

"I knowed a guy in the army three years. And he never touched a woman once."

"There was somethin' wrong with 'im then. Did he have all 'is organs?"

"I don't know what the hell he had. I reckon he did though, or they wouldn't a-took him in the army."

"He was a queer then."

"Bull! He was just as natural as you or me. He walked and talked and acted just like anyone else."

"That don't mean nothin'. Some-a these damned queers practice walkin' and talkin' just so you can't tell it on 'em."

"That's what you say! I can spot a queer as far away as I can see 'im. They either got funny lookin' eyes or they're wearin' some kind-a queer clothes or somethin'."

"You get in some big city, and you can be ridin' in a bus right beside one, and you won't even know anything about it."

"You just let *me* be ridin' in a bus sometime with one of the bastards. I'd like to see him make a pass at *me*!"

"They don't go around makin' passes at every man they meet."

"The hell they don't! They can't help themselves."

"I wonder what makes them that way?"

"They're born that way. Look at this queer sonofabitch down at the *Herald* office."

"Who's that?"

"Stirche."

"Stirche? Is he a queer?"

"Whatta you think? He's been in town for damned near a year now, and he hain't been out with a woman yet."

"How do you know he hain't?"

"I don't know when he'd a-done it. He's down there in that apartment Peermans got over their garage every night. Settin' there bangin' away at a typewriter. He never misses a night."

"Well, I'll be damned. Don't even want a woman, I suppose."

"Hell, no, he don't want a woman. He wouldn't know what to do with one if he had her."

"I never could understand that kind-a stuff. What fun would it be for two men to go to bed together. What would you *do*?"

"What do a couple kids do up in a hayloft?"

"I don't know! I never done anything like that all my life. Not even when I was a kid. Is *that* what queers do?"

"Hell, I *suppose* it is! I don't know any more about it than you do."

"What you supposed to do in this town for women?" A farm hand sitting in a high legged chair along the wall sought to

turn a question that was purely academic into more practical channels.

"I saw May Tarble up at Nate's a while ago," Bart Richards told him.

The farm hand was interested. "Who's May Tarble?"

"She's a burned up old whore that hangs around town," Ketch Martin said, lowering himself to one knee and squinting across the snooker table to get a proper angle on the cue ball. "If you got any sense, you'll leave her alone."

"Is she the only one in town?"

"She's the only one I know about. The rest of them just do it for their friends."

"I'll go to Bridgeport with you, Stew," someone offered.

"There oughtta be something closer than Bridgeport," Stew complained. "Are you sure this Tarble babe's got it?"

"He don't know if she's got it or not," Vic said.

Ketch halted in the act of shooting and looked at Vic in surprise. "You don't think she's *not* got it, do you?" he asked.

"Nobody knows," Vic said.

"The hell they don't! Ask Laird Thompson or George Pate. She got them both the same night."

"I heard about that," Vic said. "But them guys was both over to Bridgeport right after that. They don't know it was May give it to 'em."

Ketch laid his cue on the table and took a wallet from his pocket. "I'll just bet anyone ten bucks she's got it."

"How the hell you gonna find out?" Deno demanded.

This stickler was enough to shatter Ketch's positive manner. He cast around uncertainly. "We'll just have to ask Laird Thompson or George Pate," he said.

"Bull!" Vic declared. "They don't know whether she's got it or not. All they know is someone give it to them."

"Yeah," Deno said. "And they don't know who."

"I'll bet ten bucks it was May Tarble, if anyone wants to call it." Ketch looked around for any takers.

"There's just one *sure* way to find out," Vic said. "If you wanna do that, I'll call you and give you two to one."

"You mean—" Ketch's eyes popped. There was no mistaking Vic's meaning. "Why, a man'd be a damned fool to do *that*. I *know* she's got it. You can tell the way she walks."

"I got twenty bucks against your ten says she hain't," Vic offered. "If you wanna *prove* it." He laughed as if he had just made a three rail bank shot.

"You go to hell!" Ketch said.

"What's the matter, Ketch?" Deno said. "You 'fraid?"

"You damned right, I'm afraid," Ketch declared. "Who wouldn't be? How about you doin' it?"

"Bull!" Deno said. "My mother didn't raise any foolish kids." His eyes alighted on Alan. "How about you, Buddy? You're always tryin' to prove what a man you are. You wanna take on May Tarble?"

"You go to hell!" Alan said.

"What's the matter? You 'fraid?"

Alan felt his face heating up. "I'm not afraid of anything!" he declared.

"The hell you're not!" Ketch said. "Then go ahead and find out for us."

"I dare you to," Deno goaded.

"You're all chicken to do it, and you want me to. Is that it?" Alan demanded.

"I'm chicken," Ketch said.

"Me too," Deno said.

"Well, I'm not!" Alan said. There was a strange something that made him say it. Even when he didn't want to.

"Why, you crazy fool!" Vic exclaimed. "Hain't you got no sense at all?"

"Let 'im do it if he wants to," Deno said. "If he's got the guts."

"Yeah," the farm hand said. "I'd like to find out if she *has* got it."

Everyone was looking at Alan.

"What makes you think she'll go with me?" he asked Ketch. "And even if she does, she might not—"

"All you gotta do is push her over," Ketch said. "Then we'll wait nine or ten days and see what happens. If you're still okay, I pay Vic ten bucks. If you're not, he pays me twenty."

"Don't you do it, All" Stanley said. "They're making a sap outta you."

"You say she's up at Nate's?" Alan asked Bart Richards. Bart nodded. "She been drinkin' beer up there since eight o'clock."

Alan looked back at Ketch. "How'm I gonna get her outside? I can't go into Nate's front room."

"Nate closes in another hour. You can get her on the way home."

"Okay," Alan said, "but I'll have to borrow someone's car."

"Whatta you need a car for?"

"Well, whatta you want me to do? Lean her up against a tree?"

"You can use my car," Deno said. "Only I'll go along and drive for you."

"How'm I supposed to get the job done with you along?" Alan said.

"You mean she might be bashful?" Ketch seemed to be amused at the thought.

"Yeah, she might," Alan said. "I don't know her."

"She's *not* bashful. Take my word for it," Ketch said. "Someone oughtta be along anyway. To see you don't lie about what happens."

"You'll have the back seat all to yourselves," Deno promised. "I'll never take my hands off the wheel. You gonna do it, or you gonna chicken out?"

"Come on," Alan said and started for the door. "Let's pick her up."

"This is the craziest thing you've ever done, Al," Stanley called after him. "What if she *has* got it?"

"There's no one gonna say I'm chicken! About anything!" Alan said.

Deno's car was an overdecorated four door sedan: mud guards, fox tail, double exhausts, and a venetian blind at the back window. They parked across the street where they could watch the door of Nathan Pendleton's tavern and waited for May Tarble to come out. Deno sat under the wheel occasionally singing snatches of some obscene song, and Alan sat in the back seat, intently watching the door of the tavern, his chin cradled on top of the front seat cushion.

"What's the matter? You 'fraid she'll get away?" Deno asked once.

Alan didn't answer. He was thinking about May Tarble. He had seen her a number of times, of course, mostly from looking inside when he walked past Nate's. She was usually there, sitting in a booth beside the juke box, a bottle of beer on the table in front of her. Sometimes there would be a man or two sitting with her, and everyone would be laughing, and there would be a lot of loud talk about something. Sex, he supposed. Adults were always talking about sex, even if they had to twist what everyone said to do it. Trying to make a big production out of something that was pretty much an act that was so common. About like brushing your teeth, only more fun.

He wondered how the men who sat at the table with May Tarble could enjoy themselves so much. Of course, they were thirty-five, and maybe sex was different some way then. There must be something more to it than anyone knew about at seventeen, no matter how much you tried. And it must be the something more that enabled a man of thirty-five to have a good time sitting at a table and talking of sex with a woman of thirty-five who was all hips and breasts and beer breath. It made him feel like he was missing out somewhere. Like a burglar who works hard to break into a bank vault and

then discovers that the sack he brought with him has a hole in it.

The neon tavern sign suddenly switched off, and Alan watched the door more intently than ever. The street was deserted.

"She sure as hell stays till the last dog's dead," Deno commented. "We'll be lucky if she hain't got some old stud waitin' to go home with her."

A woman's figure appeared in the doorway and came out onto the sidewalk. She stopped under a street light, cleared her throat with a loud hacking sound, and spat. It was May.

"She should-a strained that. It might have an olive in it," Deno said.

They sat there for a few minutes after May had disappeared around the corner, and then Deno pulled away from the curb with a screech of tires. She was about ready to cross the street at the end of the sccond block when they caught up with her. Deno screeched to a stop right in her path and so close that May had to take a couple steps backward.

"Your brakes work," she yelled at them. "Now try your lights."

Alan stuck his head out the rear window. "Where you going?"

"Home," she said.

Alan threw open the door. "Get in. We'll take you."

"Who the hell are you?" She came up to the car and peered inside. "You're Clyde Peerman's boy, hain't you?" she said.

"Yeah," Alan said. "Get in."

"Who are you?" she asked Deno.

"What the hell's the difference?" Deno demanded.

May laughed in comradely fashion. "That's a hell of a name!" One of her big front teeth was framed all the way around in gold.

"Get in. We'll take you home," Alan repeated his offer.

"How come a coupla kids like you want to take *me* home?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"How come you're not out sniffin' around with some of these little whores your own age?"

"Aw, those silly young girls make me sick," Alan said. "Don't they you, Deno?"

"Yeah," Deno said. "They're always either gigglin' or cryin'."

"Come on. Get in," Alan invited again.

"If you damned kids think I'm drunk, you're crazy as hell," May said. "I could drink beer all night and never feel it."

"We don't think you're drunk," Alan said. "We're just offering you a ride home. You want to get in or not?"

"Hell, yes, I'll get in," May said. "Why not?"

She plopped down on the cushion beside Alan. Deno gave the door a slam and spun up a shower of rocks with his rear wheels in getting started.

"God bless Americal" May exclaimed. "A cowboy!"

"Yeah," Deno said. "You wantta ride my pony?"

"No, I don't!" May declared. "I *thought* that was why you was pickin' me up."

"You hadn't ought to be suspicious," Alan said.

"Yeah?" May laughed. "That's what Jo-Jo said. Now he's in jail."

Alan laughed too. "Who's Jo-Jo?"

"Damned if I know," May said. "Someone I ate, drank, or slept with, I reckon." She laughed again.

Alan laughed again too and let his hand settle lightly on her knee.

May scooted to the front of the seat, and Alan's hand lost contact with her. "That's just what I expected!" There was triumph in her voice. "That's just *exactly* what I expected!"

"What?" Alan asked innocently.

"That!"

"What?"

"What you just done."

"What'd I do?"

"You know damned well what you done."

"Well, what's wrong with that?"

"If that's what you want, how come you hain't out with someone your own age? Whatta you want me for?"

"I told you," Alan said. "I wouldn't touch one of those young girls with a ten-inch pole. Not even if I had one."

"Them little bitches'll get you in trouble," May declared. "You know that?"

"I know they will. That's why I don't have anything to do with them."

"Aw, bull!" May settled back into the seat again. "I'll bet you take out a different one every night. If you're anything like old Clyde, you do. How is old Clyde nowadays?"

"He's okay," Alan said and put his arm along the top of the cushion behind her. "How're you?"

"I need a drink," May said. "You got any whiskey?"

"Not a drop."

"What the hell's this?" May said. "Don't you know when you're tryin' to make someone, the first thing you gotta have's a bottle of whiskey?"

"That's the second thing," Alan said. "I got the first thing."

"You goddam ornery whelp!"

May chortled her deep appreciation, and Alan let his arm slip from the back of the seat to rest lightly around her shoulders.

"Don't you really have anything to do with young girls?" she asked seriously.

"Hell, no!" Alan said.

"You're lyin'," May said. "I've seen you with them."

"Well, sure I go to a movie with them or something like that." Alan tried to give the impression of wholesome youth with just a faint blemish. That seemed to be the way everyone liked youth best. "But I don't really have anything to do with them." He let the arm around her shoulders drop, and

his hand rested on her breast. "I like someone that's old enough to know what it's all about for something like that."

"Someone that's older knows how to take care of herself," May asserted. "You don't have to worry about gettin' a disease."

From the front seat, Deno snorted wildly and disguised it as a cough.

"I'm sold," Alan said. "When do we start?"

May laughed and poked him playfully with her elbow. "You don't want to do anything like that with me," she said. "I'm too old for you."

"You're not so old," Alan said.

"How old do you think I am?" For the first time she looked directly into his face. There was an anxious look in her eyes. Alan knew his answer was important.

"Aw, I don't know," he said easily. "I never could tell a girl's age very well. They all look alike to me."

"Come on, goddammit! You can guess, can't you?" May wasn't going to be put off.

"Twenty-something?" Alan said. "Maybe twenty-eight or twenty-nine?"

She leaned back in the seat again and settled his hand in her lap, where she held it in both hers. "That's pretty close," she said.

"How old *are* you?" Alan asked because he wondered what she would say.

"A woman never tells her age. Don't you know that?"

"I don't know much about women." Alan intended it for a joke, but May appeared to take it seriously. Probably he hadn't punched it hard enough. If it had been in a letter, he could have written ha-ha after it. Then she would know.

"How old are you?" May asked.

"Guess."

She studied him thoughtfully for a few seconds. "Nineteen?"

Alan nodded his head. "I'll be twenty in a couple months."

That makes us both in our twenties—practically.” He moved his hand to her knee again. She made no move to stop him, and he put it under the edge of her skirt. She was holding both legs rigidly together. He put his head down on her shoulder, and they rode along in silence.

Deno was out of town now, driving furiously down the highway.

“Where do you think I live?” May shouted to him above the whine of tires on the pavement.

“This is a short cut,” Deno shouted back.

“I suppose you two think you’ll take me out in the country someplace and two time me and then I’ll never see you again,” she said to Alan.

“I don’t know what makes you think that,” Alan said. “I got an idea after tonight I’m gonna be around every once in awhile.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet!” It was intended to be derisive, but Alan couldn’t miss the note of longing in her voice.

“I will,” he said.

“I used to have a boy friend like you,” May said. “We had lots of fun together. That’s when I lived in St. Louis. We went someplace nearly every night.”

“I didn’t know you ever lived in St. Louis,” Alan said.

“It was a long time ago,” May said. “You was still wettin’ your diapers when I lived in St. Louis.”

Alan didn’t like the reverie in her voice. He tried to bring her back from it. “Not me,” he said. “I was a bottle baby.”

But May didn’t laugh. “We went steady for five years,” she said. “You know what I like about you?”

“What?”

“Because you’re so clean-lookin’. Them hicks that hang around up at Nate’s make me sick to my stomach sometimes. They think if they buy you a bottle of beer they got a right to sleep with you all night.”

“That wouldn’t be bad,” Alan said.

“What wouldn’t?”

"Sleeping with you all night." He tried to wriggle his hand between her knees, but she kept them clamped close together.

"That's not all a girl thinks about," she said. "I'd like to take a car ride once in awhile or go to a show or something like that."

"I'll take you to a show in Bridgeport sometime," Alan said.

"When?"

"Next time I get the car."

"By-god, you'd better!"

She let her legs relax, and they spread apart. Her flesh felt hot and flabby to Alan's touch.

Back at the curb in front of May's house, Alan opened the car door for her. "Here we are," he said.

May scooted half way out and then turned back to Deno. "Thanks for the ride," she said airily.

"Don't thank me," Deno said. "I enjoyed the floor show."

May was out on the ground now. "Hain't you goin' to the door with me?" she asked Alan.

"I don't need to go to the door with you, do I?" he said.

"Aw, come to the door with me, goddammit," she said. "It's not gonna hurt you."

Alan got out and started up the sidewalk beside her.

"You really meant it about us goin' to Bridgeport, didn't you?" she said.

"Sure," Alan told her.

She took his hand in hers as they walked. "I get so lonesome around here I could cry," she said. Alan didn't say anything, and she went on. "There's not so much difference in our ages. Not enough to matter. And you don't have to worry about anything with me."

They were on the porch now. There was a swing at one end nearly hidden by a big trellis. "Let's set in the swing a while," she said.

"I gotta be going," Alan told her.

"Just a little while, honey," she said. "No one can see what we're doin'."

"I gotta be going," Alan said. "It's late."

"You was lyin' about takin' me to Bridgeport, wasn't you?" she said.

Alan felt uncomfortable. "What makes you think that?"

"I can tell," she said. She sat in the swing. "You're just like all the rest of them. A goddam liar." There was no resentment in her voice, only resignation.

"I gotta be going," Alan said. "Goodbye."

She didn't answer, and he turned and went down the steps. He heard the swing chains squeak dismally as he went down the sidewalk toward the waiting Deno.

Everyone at Vic's kept close check with Alan for the next two weeks. When the critical period had passed, Ketch paid Vic ten dollars with a great deal of swearing. The story went the rounds, and everyone was more convinced than ever before that Alan was a real oddity.

CHAPTER SEVEN

IT WAS GRACE'S custom to begin about four o'clock every Friday afternoon looking for Clyde to come home from his week on the road. The procedure began with going often to the front window to look out, progressed to the bathroom, where there was a last-minute-fresh arrangement of towels on the racks, and culminated in the kitchen, where Clyde's

favorite foods were brought to a premature, gustatory peak, maintained so for several anxious, fretful minutes, and then permitted to deteriorate, stewing in their juices and gradually shriveling away like prime raspberries left too long on the bush. Clyde was late about one Friday out of every four.

When Alan asked his mother why she didn't wait until Clyde got there before she started supper, she said she never could stand just sitting down waiting for someone. Clyde suggested too that it would be more sensible for Grace to wait until he arrived before she began cooking, and when Grace told him that waiting made her nervous, he laughed and said she was just like her father who "walked on ahead" one day when Clyde and he had a flat tire. Clyde put on the spare wheel and picked the old man up a few minutes later about a quarter mile down the road.

It was nine o'clock one Friday when Clyde got in. Grace had the meal ready at six. For an hour and a half she alternated going to the window to look out with stirring things on the stove and adding water. At seven-thirty, Alan ate alone. Grace said she didn't want anything. She maintained her vigil until eight o'clock, when she turned off the fire and sat stodgily down at the kitchen table to wait for whatever length of time it might turn out to be. Clyde appeared, smiling and talking baby talk.

"Me's home, Mommie, me's home," he announced.

"It's about time," Grace said dully. "Where you been?"

"Oh, me's been all over, Mommie," Clyde said. "Me's been to Carlinville today."

"Things are all ruined now." Grace indicated the pans sitting like sad blackbirds on top of the stove.

"Me's had supper, Mommie." He tilted Grace's face up and kissed her teasingly on the forehead.

Grace allowed herself to be kissed. "I might-a knowed you'd look out for yourself," she said complainingly. "There's no danger of you going hungry, is there?"

"There it is again!" Clyde's good humor was gone. "I no

sooner step in the door, than you start in raisin' hell with me about something! What'd you expect me to do, go hungry?"

"It looks like you could-a waited till you got home. You knowed I'd have supper ready for you."

"How the hell can I travel half way over the state all week and get in here the exact minute for supper every time it's Friday night?"

"You could if you thought anything about your family! Don't you think Alan and me ever get tired eating by ourselves all the time? A woman likes to have her husband eat with her once in a while."

"Okay, okay! Stop the yow-yowin'!" Clyde waved his arms wildly. "I'll eat with you! I'll eat again! I've eat once, but I'll eat again! Come on, get it on the table!"

"I don't want you to!" Grace declared spitefully.

"Then what the hell's all the yow-yowin' for?"

"You'd know what it's for if you had to set here in this house all the time like I do waiting for your man to come home so you'd have someone to talk to."

"Why in the hell can't you talk to Alan? He can talk as good as I can."

"Because Alan's just a boy. A child."

"Aw, bull! You just want something to yow-yow about. You've yow-yowed so much you enjoy it."

"Other men come home and take their families out someplace once in a while. You never take Alan and me any place."

"Other men hain't out on the road all week tryin' to make a livin' either." Clyde was nervously pacing around the kitchen. "I go so many places all week, I just wantta stay home and rest when I get here."

"Then why don't you stay home and rest instead of staying up at Walter Sholty's filling station all the time?"

"Now, by-god, you've got it twisted around so I can't even

stop in and see an old friend I've knowed all my life without bein' mean to you some way."

"I don't care how many friends you stop in and see."

"Then will you cut out this goddam yow-yowin'?"

"I'd just like to go someplace once in awhile like other women do."

"Where in hell is it you wantta go so bad?"

"I'd like to go to a picture show or church or any place. Just any place to get out of this house once in a while."

"You know damned well I said I wasn't goin' back to that church till they get another preacher. That silly son-of-a-bitch lookin' at you over the top of his glasses and actin' like you can't get to heaven unless he okays it someway."

"Maybe you don't like to go to church because you've got a guilty conscience."

"Why the hell should I have a guilty conscience?"

"Because of the women you have out with you all the time; that's why!"

"What women?"

"God only knows what women! That ornery Lindley girl for one."

Clyde looked extremely pained. "You can't forget ornery women for one little minute, can you? That shows you've got a dirty mind! You're the most suspicious woman God ever let live!"

"Maybe I wouldn't have to be so suspicious if I had the right kind of man. And if I could get out of this house once in a while."

Clyde faced her squarely. "Grab your hat, by-god! I'll get you out of this house right now!"

Grace made no move.

"Come on, goddammit!" Clyde said. "You wanted to go someplace. Now we're goin'. Get your hat." He took her by the hand and drew her up from the chair.

Grace tried to jerk away from him. "Leave me be!"

But Clyde retained his hold. "You said you wanted to

go someplace. Now, by-god, I'm takin' you. I've rode all day, and I'm wore out. But I'll take you someplace so I won't have to keep hearin' about it for the next two days."

"A lot of fun it'd be for me to go someplace now, wouldn't it?" Grace demanded bitterly. "I'm all nervous now."

"It'll be as much fun for you as it will me," Clyde declared. He gave her a push toward the living room door. "Go on, get ready."

The force of Clyde's insistence appeared to act as a deterrent on Grace's ire.

"There's no place to go now," she said uncertainly.

"The hell there's not. We'll go to the picture show."

"It's too late."

"It's never too late to go to a picture show. They run till midnight." He pushed her along in front of him toward the bedroom. "Get ready."

"I don't wantta go anyplace now," Grace said. "Not after all this."

"Well, by-god, you're goin' anyway. I'm gettin' sick-a hearin' all the time about how you set at home while other women are out goin' places." He grabbed a dress from the closet and threw it at Grace. "Here, put this on."

"I'm not going to wear *that*."

"Well, wear whatever in hell you want to then. But, by-god, let's get to that picture show so I can stop hearin' about it."

In the sitting room, Alan tried to read a magazine. Through the open door of the bedroom, he could see Clyde sitting on the edge of the bed while Grace moved around the room getting ready, insisting all the time she didn't want to go. His mother's complaints pricked his skin like a wool undershirt. He reached as far down his back as he could and scratched. Then he itched under an arm.

They came out together, Grace in front still objecting and Clyde right behind her.

"You wantta go along, Alan?" Clyde asked.

"I'm reading," Alan said.

"Well, you come and go with us."

"Aw, I don't wantta go to that movie," Alan said. "I've seen it."

"I don't care if you've seen it or not," Clyde said. "It won't be any harder on you than it is on me. Your mother wants the whole family to go out, and, by-god, we're goin'. So she can stop yow-yowin' about it."

"I'll have to change pants," Alan said reluctantly.

"Change pants, hell!" Clyde declared. "Come on. When I was your age, one pair of pants was all I had."

The three of them went out in a sullen, viscous mass. Clyde got into the car on the driver's side and slammed the door shut. Alan opened the other door for his mother. Grace was just ready to get in when she suddenly bent and picked something up from the floor. Alan heard a sharp intake of breath as she straightened up with the object. He looked down at her hand. It contained a woman's compact with the big initials LL emblazoned in some kind of sparkly cut glass design across its face.

"What the hell you got there?" Clyde demanded.

"I've got Lorraine Lindley's compact!" she screamed at him, and threw it straight at Clyde's face.

It struck his forehead and came open, releasing a little cascade of powder that poured down over Clyde's face and onto the shoulder of his blue, serge suit. There was the smell of crushed violets everyplace in an instant. It was an offensively heavy odor that assailed Alan's nostrils and made him think of his grandfather's funeral, the only funeral he had ever attended.

Clyde brushed at his face, swearing. Grace turned away and ran for the house, sobbing as she went. Alan stood stupidly holding to the open car door and looking from one of his parents to the other.

Clyde got out on the ground, bending over to keep the powder off his pants, and brushed at the light spot on his

shoulder. It looked like a clown act of some kind. One side of his face was coated heavily with the white powder, and the other side was a fiery red. "Goddam woman!" Clyde said. "Can't do anything to please her!" He straightened up and went into the house.

Alan followed.

Grace had gone into the bedroom and locked the door. Clyde hammered on it. "Let me in, Grace."

The only answer was a muffled sob as if Grace were crying into a pillow.

"What the hell did you have to fly off the handle that way for?" Clyde demanded through the door. "That wasn't what you thought it was. I don't know how that compact got in the car."

He waited a long time for Grace to answer, but there was only the sound of her sobbing.

"That compact belongs to one of Alan's girls," Clyde called to her. "He had the car one night when I was here last week."

Still no answer.

Clyde hammered more insistently. "Grace, open this door. I wantta go to bed."

"If you think you're gonna come in here and sleep with me after laying around with that little bitch all week, you've got another think coming!" The vehemence in Grace's voice came unstrained through the wooden panel.

"Now you don't know a thing you're talkin' about," Clyde shouted. "I hain't seen Lorraine Lindley in more'n a year. I don't know a thing about her."

More sobbing from the bedroom.

"Grace, you open this door and stop this goddam silliness."

No answer.

"Grace, I wantta go to bed."

"You can go to bed out there on the sofa," came through the door.

"I'm not sleepin' on any sofa either."

No answer.

"Grace, do you hear me?"

No answer.

"Grace, I'm goin' in and wash this powder off-a my face, and when I get back I expect this door to be open. You hear me?"

"It won't be," Grace's voice came hysterically. "It won't ever be unlocked again when you're home."

"I'm goin' to the bathroom now," Clyde said through the door. "If this door's not open when I get back, I'll bust it down."

Alan went to bed while Clyde was in the bathroom. He heard Clyde go back to the door and pound again. There was more angry shouting back and forth, and then there came the thuds of Clyde throwing his weight against the door. Alan felt the thuds as much as he heard them. The sounds accumulated on his chest, and it was like being buried alive in coarse sand. He threw the blankets off and breathed deeply. The air reeked with the heavy odor of crushed violets.

There was the splintering sound of the door flying open, and the angry voices of his parents became louder. They went on for a long time. Alan turned over on his stomach and let his head hang over the edge of the bed. He wedged one ear up against the wall and the other against the mattress so that he couldn't hear quite so plainly. The pressure felt good and helped keep him from crying.

The next morning Grace was sullenly silent as she went about the grim business of preparing breakfast. Her eyes were red, and her entire face looked swollen. She sniffed often as she stood frying eggs. Clyde and Alan sat at the table waiting. Clyde had a small cut on his forehead, where the compact had struck, but he was his usual, good-humored, bantering self.

"Mommie still mad this mornin'?" he questioned in his little boy voice.

Grace blew her nose and returned the handkerchief to her apron pocket.

"Mommie got her boys mixed up," Clyde said speaking humorously of her in third person as if she were not there. "She thought Alan's girl's compact was Clyde's girl's compact. Didn't you, Mommie?"

Grace didn't say anything, and Clyde turned his attention to Alan. "Who did you have in that car last Saturday night?" he said.

"Stanley Mack and I were together," Alan said. "He had Irma Clarey, and I had Carol Hibble."

"What the hell would *they* be doin' with a compact that's got LL on the lid?" Clyde appeared to be mystified.

Alan squirmed uncomfortably. "I don't know."

Grace continued to fry eggs.

"You be careful with your girls from now on," Clyde said as if admonishing Alan, but his voice was light and easy. "You got your poor old pa into lots of trouble last night." He fingered the cut on his forehead. "Mommie mad."

Grace brought the platter of eggs and bacon strips to the table. "It's ready," she said.

Clyde scooped two eggs and a half-dozen pieces of bacon off into his plate. "Oooooohhh, Mommie's good eggs!" he said with little boy enthusiasm. "Nobody can fry good eggs like Mommie."

Grace sat down at the table. "Who's going to fix that door you busted last night?" she demanded.

"What's the matter with it?" Clyde said.

"You know what's the matter with it. The lock's busted off, and the wood's split."

"Whatta we need a lock for?" Clyde's mouth was crammed full. He chewed on one side, making his cheek on that side into a little pouch.

"What do *most* people have locks on their bedroom doors for?" Grace said sarcastically.

"You don't need to worry about anyone breaking into

your bedroom, Mommie. You got Alan and me to look after you."

"I'm not going to live in a house that's got the doors all busted up," Grace declared.

Her sharp voice jarred Clyde's good humor. "How'd you like to live the way some people do?" he demanded through the mouthful of egg and bacon. "They cook and eat and sleep all in one room."

"Are you going to have someone fix that door?"

"No, by-god, I'm not! That door don't need a lock on it."

But Clyde's good humor, buoyant as an empty bottle, was quickly back. "Mommie want an egg?" he said offering her the platter on which a single egg was left.

"No," Grace said.

Clyde slid the egg off into his own plate.

"Can Alan take me to the grocery store in the car?" Grace said. "I wantta get a sack of flour and some other heavy things."

"I'll take you myself, Mommie." Clyde struck the table playfully as if to emphasize the generosity of his offer. "How'll that be?"

"I don't want you to take me," Grace said. "I want Alan to take me."

"Okay, Mommie," Clyde said. "This afternoon he can. I've gotta get the oil changed this morning."

"Does that mean you'll be up at Walter Sholty's all morning?"

"Well, you don't want me around here, do you?" Clyde said. "I thought you hated me."

"You could fix that door you broke," Grace said.

"To hell with that door. That door's not worryin' me a little bit." Clyde sopped the last bit of egg yolk up with a piece of bread, put the morsel into his mouth, and stood up. "You gonna have dinner when you always do?"

"I don't know if I will or not," Grace said. "Maybe I will, and maybe I won't."

"Mommie have dinner for her man, and Mommie'll always have a man." Clyde patted her playfully on the shoulder. "Good old Mommie," he said sanctimoniously as if repeating the Lord's prayer. "What the hell would we ever do without good old Mommie?"

Alan swallowed his last spoonful of oatmeal and stood up too.

"You going with him?" Grace asked.

"I thought I'd ride up town with him," Alan said. "You don't want me for anything, do you?"

"No, I guess not," Grace said resignedly.

While Clyde settled down to talk with the other loafers at Walter Sholty's and wait for Slim Farrel to change oil in the car, Alan went on up to Vic's. He liked Vic's morning atmosphere. It was his favorite time of day. Afternoons and nights at Vic's were fun, of course, but that was about all you could say for them. They were fun like a playground used to be fun when Alan was a kid—loud and confused. Mornings at Vic's weren't like that. Mornings were almost solemn. They had real solid substance to them.

There was never anyone much there in the morning, and everything had a freshness about it. The tobacco smoke of the night before would be cleared out, the tile floor would be freshly mopped, and that was the time Vic was usually doing the little extra things that were like making a living. One time he would empty out the peanut machine and wrap the pennies. Another time he would open a case of cigarettes and put them in the glass-door shelves behind the counter, or he would fill the showcase with candy bars and chewing gum and cough drops. Alan liked to calculate how long it would take to sell out the merchandise, and then he would try to estimate how much money Vic would make. Vic never showed the slightest reluctance in answering the most pointed questions. As a matter of fact, he seemed to derive satisfaction from speculating on his prospects along with Alan or anyone else who might profess an interest. He would go

into great detail concerning the merits from a profit standpoint of one candy bar or "piece of candy," as Vic called it, over another. Sometimes if he felt that some particular point needed substantiation, he would even hunt out invoices and shipping statements from the companies who supplied him. Alan had heard Clyde do a lot of talk concerning his furnace deals, of course, but Clyde's deals always appeared to be so complicated that Alan didn't feel like a part of them. Vic's merchandising processes were so simple by comparison that Alan grasped them readily. A morning at Vic's never failed to reestablish the resolve in his mind that someday he would own a poolroom of his own.

About eleven-thirty Alan went back to the filling station. Clyde was tossing nickels at a crack with two other men, and he was eighty-five cents ahead.

"You ready to go home?" he asked when Alan came in.

"I guess so," Alan said.

"We better go then," Clyde said. "It's about dinner time."

Walter Sholty laughed. "You wouldn't wantta get locked outta the kitchen, would you, Clyde? When you're locked outta the bedroom, you can always get better stuff somewhere else. But that restaurant cookin' 'll kill you."

Clyde laughed. "Oh, Mommie won't lock us outta the kitchen, will she, Alan?"

"We better be going," Alan said.

They entered the house by the back door. There was no evidence that a meal was in preparation. The old-fashioned, high legged gas stove looked cold and neglected. The floor was unswept. At the sink, a drip from the faucet fell into a desolate looking skillet left to soak and overflowed its sides in a minute trickle of grease and dirty water. There was a brown paper sack of groceries lying on its side on the table.

Grace was lying on the sofa in the front room. Her face was turned to the sofa's back, and one hand was thrown up so that even the side of her face was hidden.

"We's home, Mommie. We's home," Clyde announced from the doorway.

There was a moaning sound from Grace.

Clyde crossed to the sofa. "Your boys are home, Mommie. How about some good dinner time? Good old Mommie!" He patted her upper arm, making the flesh quiver.

Grace gave out a long, choked moan and came erect in an instant, holding herself that way by knees on the seat of the sofa and hands gripping the back of it. "Leave me alone!" she sobbed, kneeling herself furiously away from Clyde to the opposite end of the sofa.

Alan started at sight of his mother's face. It was a dark, blotchy red all over, swelled and puffy and wet with tears. Her eyes had an insane look, and when her wild glance fell upon him for an instant there was no sign of recognition. It was the look of a cornered animal of which all men are enemies.

Clyde put a hand on her shoulder. "What the hell's the matter with you now?" he said impatiently.

Grace screamed a horrible, long-drawn wail and jerked away from Clyde's grasp, tearing a rip across the shoulder of her dress. The shoulder strap beneath parted, and the slip gaped open, exposing Grace's white shoulder and upper arm in bloodless contrast to the awful color in her face. She straddled the end of the sofa in a mad scramble to avoid Clyde's reach. With the sofa between them, she turned to face him.

"You're a goddam sonofabitch!" she shrieked. "I'll kill you! I've took all of this I'm going to take!"

Clyde's anger was building up too. Grim, hard lines set around his mouth and eyes. "What the hell's the matter with you?"

"You brought that little whore home with you!" She was leaning over the back of the sofa and screaming the words at Clyde as if they were hard lumps for throwing. "You can't even save a week-end for your family now! Five days a week

ain't enough! Now you got to have your whore with you even when you come home!"

"What whore you talkin' about?"

"You know what whore! That little Lindley bitch that lost her compact in the car! *My* car! It's all over town about you and her coming home together last night! Everyone knows about it!" The words were coming in a torrent. Grace seemed unable to stop them. They gushed out. "I couldn't even walk down to the grocery store this morning without having people tell me about it . . . Currys . . . Sweitzers! They all know she's back, and they know how she got here!"

"Anyone says I brought Lorraine Lindley to town with me last night is a goddam liar!" Clyde shouted.

"Are they? Maybe you're not as smart as you think you are! I know how she got here! And I know how she'll leave too! If you don't take her in the car with you, you'll meet her in Bridgeport! And then the two of you'll be sleeping together again all next week! Just like you been doing for the last year!" Grace's voice was hysterical and penetrating. The shrillness of it hurt Alan's ears. "If you only knowed what a fool you're making out of yourself! How everyone's laughing behind your back! Spending your money on an ornery little slut like that! Letting her break up your home! You filthy whoremonger you!" And then as if she derived satisfaction from the sound of the word, Grace continued to scream it at Clyde's head. "Whoremonger! Whoremonger! Whoremonger!"

The words goaded her fury, and she came around the sofa and threw herself at him. Her nails raked his face, scraping away skin on both sides in shallow grooves that ran blood.

Clyde grabbed her wrists and drew her hands down. They wrestled for a moment, and then he threw her to the sofa, his own body falling with her and holding her down. Grace jerked in his arms trying to free herself and screaming. Above the sound of her insane screeching came Clyde's angry voice.

"You're outta your head! You've gone crazy! You oughtta be put in an asylum!"

The scene blurred before Alan's vision, and he knew he was crying. The tears stung and made his eyes hurt. He crossed to the sofa and looked down at his parents. Clyde's arms were entwining Grace's body, holding her arms down useless at her sides. The weight of his body kept her from rising. She struggled futilely for several minutes while Alan's nerves stretched tighter and tighter. If it didn't stop soon, he would have to do something. He picked out a spot to hit on the back of Clyde's head.

Gradually Grace's struggles lessened until they became merely a succession of convulsive twitches. Her screams gave way to spasmodic groans. Her eyes were closed. Clyde's eyes were shining with an insane light. His position on top of Grace placed his lips close to her ear. When he began to talk, it was as if he were murmuring love words to quiet her, but there was nothing soothing in his voice. It came hard and uncompromising, a fanatic reciting his creed into the ear of an unbeliever even when all hope for conversion is past.

"You never did understand me, and you never will. You don't know what it's like bein' a man—a *real* man. Women are the breath of life to me. I can't help it the way I am any more than I can help eatin' when I'm hungry. It's just the way the Lord made me. It's the way he made all men if they're really *men*. You oughtta understand that, Mommie, after all these years. You can rant and rave and raise hell all you want to, and you won't change things the least little bit. The only one can do that's the Lord hisself."

It was The Creation, an absolution that cleansed all anger from Clyde's voice. He stood up. Grace lay still except for a spasmodic twitching that was like reflex action. Her moaning was low, and her eyes were closed. Her face had changed from the angry red color to an ashen look. Alan put a hand on her forehead. It was cold and had a clammy feel.

"She'll be okay," Clyde said. "Just let her sleep awhile."

Mommie's had fits like this before." His voice was easy. His only signs of emotion were a deep breathing and the fanatical shine in his eyes. "I suppose you think I mistreated her. Well, you'll be a man yourself someday, and then you'll know how it is. Anyway I hope you do. You will if you're a *real* man."

He went into the bedroom, and Alan could hear him moving about in there. "*If you're a real man.*" If his father had any doubts about Alan's manhood, why didn't he ask someone? Any of them at the poolroom could tell him. Anyone. They all knew what kind of *man* Alan was. He hadn't always notched the bedpost for them to see, figuratively speaking, as he had with May Tarble, but they still knew. There wasn't a one of them who wouldn't concede that Alan was "a chip off the old block." But Clyde had said, ". . . *if you're a real man.*" Alan felt guilty. Why hadn't Walter Sholty or someone told Clyde about the May Tarble episode? That should be convincing.

When Clyde came out of the bedroom, he was carrying his suitcase. "How is she?" he asked Alan.

"She hasn't moved."

Clyde went to the sofa. He took Grace's chin and rolled her head from side to side in an attempt to arouse her. "Mommie!" he called.

Grace's eyes opened. She stared dully at Clyde with no sign of recognition.

"I'm goin' now, Mommie," Clyde said. "I've had all this damned yow-yowin' I can stand for one trip. I'll be back next week, and the minute you start chewin' me out about something I'll turn right around and walk out again. If a man can't come into his own house without bein' nagged at all the time, then he just as well stay away. You hear me, Mommie?"

The expression on Grace's face didn't change. She stared unblinkingly.

Clyde turned away. "Take care of your mother, Alan," he said. "I'll see you next week. 'Bye."

"Bye," Alan said.

"Be a good boy." And Clyde was gone.

Alan heard the car start up and pull out of the driveway. He turned back to his mother. "You want me to call the doctor?" he said.

Grace didn't even look at him. She stared at the ceiling. "You all right?"

It was like talking to a wax figure. Alan straightened his mother's body to make her more comfortable and brought a couple pillows for her head. She lay in whatever position he placed her, apparently devoid of all will.

When he had made her as comfortable as he could, he went to his own room and threw himself face down on the unmade bed. It was as if the horizontal position of his body caused tears to spill out the holes in his head that were eyes . . . like a mama doll that wets. *A mama doll?* Why did he have to think of that? "*If you're a real man,*" Clyde had said. And remembering the words, Alan thought of Brother Phillcrest. He tried never to think of Brother Phillcrest any more, but it was hard not to. He cried without making a sound and went to sleep with his face pressed into the wet pillow.

CHAPTER EIGHT

IT WAS after three o'clock when Alan got up. He would have stayed in bed longer, but he was hungry, and the air in the room was stifling. He had been sweating, and the clothes stuck to his body in uncomfortable damp swatches. He raised a window to let in air, and noises from the outside

came into the room stepping warily over the window sill like pregnant women. The rest of the house was silent.

He looked into the mirror. His clothes were wrinkled. His eyes were a little red but not enough for anyone to tell he had been crying. There was perspiration on his forehead, and his crew-cut had a wilted look. He brushed his hair to make it stand up and went into the living room to check on his mother.

Grace was sitting up at one end of the sofa. Her body was rigid and tense looking, but the trance-like stare was gone from her eyes. She turned her head to look at Alan when he came into the room.

"I'll eat down town someplace," he told her.

"All right," Grace said dully.

That seemed to cover it. There was nothing else to say, and Alan turned away. He took a bath, changed clothes, and let himself out the kitchen door so he wouldn't have to go through the room again where his mother sat in wake-like immobility.

Outside, he headed for the *Herald* office. Hungry as he was, it was time to address his papers, and he always liked to get that done early while everyone was still around. If he was ever late getting the papers addressed, it usually happened that Howard Stirche and he were left in the place alone. And then Howard was always striking up a conversation or inviting him up to the apartment. Alan didn't want to be invited up to Howard's apartment—not ever—but especially not the way he was feeling now.

At the office, he entered by the back door so he wouldn't have to go past Howard's desk. He did his work as quickly and inconspicuously as possible and went out the back door an hour later carrying his addressed papers in a box on one shoulder. On his way to the post office he saw Robbie Hite standing in front of Summer's drug store, and he turned off into Oak Street a block before he needed to because he didn't want to have to speak to Robbie or have him tagging along.

With the papers mailed, he ate hamburgers and French fries at the Tastee Grill. The place was misnamed. When he closed his eyes he couldn't tell whether it was the hamburger or the French fries he chewed. He sprinkled both liberally with catsup and drank two Cokes with the meal. The feeling of hunger in his stomach was smothered. When he paid the check and stood outside on the sidewalk again, the sun was just disappearing at the upper end of Main Street. The long summer evening and night stretched in front of him endlessly. He thought of the greasy skillet in the sink at home, the faucet drip, his unmade bed, his mother's forlorn figure sitting at one end of the sofa. He couldn't go back there. It would be hours yet before bedtime, and he had slept all afternoon anyway. Automatically he turned toward Vic's.

Directly across the street from Vic's was Belle's restaurant, which also served as a bus station. A big blue and gray bus was just pulling up to the curb in front. Alan went into the pool room and turned to look out the front window. The position placed his back to the pool players, and he hoped no one had noticed his entrance. But Stanley Mack was there almost immediately.

"Where you been all afternoon?" he demanded as if Alan were late reporting for work.

"Home," Alan said.

"I got the car." Stanley seemed a little rebuffed at the lack of enthusiasm his announcement stirred. "What's the matter? Don't you wantta go someplace?"

"Where'd we go?"

"We could pick something up."

"Who?" Alan watched a half-dozen people come out of the restaurant to board the bus.

"It's Saturday night. There'll be plenty running around loose. We'll have to hunt for it."

"I don't want to."

Stanley was staring strangely at him. "What's the matter?"

"I just don't want to, that's all." Alan tried to discourage Stanley with an impatient edge in his voice.

But Stanley wasn't discouraged. "There'll be all kinds-a stuff in town tonight," he said. "Every little farm girl in the county."

"Get someone else," Alan said. "I don't want to."

A young woman in a brilliant purple dress and red shoes, the kind Jack Deno or Ketch Martin would have whistled at and called doll baby, came out the door of Belle's restaurant. She went toward the bus, swishing a little overnight bag along at her side, and looking vaguely like someone Alan should know. He wasn't sure whether it was the individual or the general type that was familiar. Then when she came around the front end of the bus, she faced directly toward Vic's window for a moment, and in that brief flash Alan recognized her. She had changed a lot since he had seen her nearly a year ago, but there was no mistaking her identity. It was Lorraine Lindley. Boarding a bus for Bridgeport.

Alan put a hand on Stanley's arm just as he was turning away. "Look at that doll baby," he said.

Stanley looked. He was just in time to see Lorraine's back side as she mounted the bus steps. The position was exactly right for showing off her very best qualities. Stanley was impressed.

"Who's that?"

"Don't you know?"

"No."

"Lorraine Lindley."

"Woweeel" Stanley's eyes were shining.

"Now if we could just pick up something like that," Alan suggested.

"Her and who else?" Stanley said. "We'd need another one."

"What for?" Alan said. "There's plenty there for both of us."

Stanley looked uncertain. "You think she'd do it?"

"Sure she'll do it," Alan said. "I know her. That's the Bridge-

port bus she's getting on. We can beat her over there and meet her in the bus station."

"You put in the gas?" Stanley said.

"Sure."

"I gotta have the car in by midnight."

"She can have us both wrung out like sponges by midnight," Alan said.

Stanley drove like crazy. He trailed the bus most of the way so close that Alan was breathing fumes from the exhaust. A couple miles outside Bridgeport, he went around so they could park the car and be waiting in the bus station when Lorraine came through. There was a little lunch counter in one end of the place.

"We can get a couple Cokes and be sitting at a table when she comes past," Alan said.

"Whatta we want with Cokes at a time like this?" Stanley said.

"We gotta make it look good," Alan said. "So she won't think we just followed her over here to pick her up."

They had just opened the bottles and sat down when the bus pulled up outside. Lorraine was the first one through the door swishing her overnight bag and smoking a cigarette. Alan stood up and stepped out into her path when she was a few feet from the table. She stopped dead still. Her lips parted in a kind of surprised look, and Alan saw a spot where the cigarette had taken away her lipstick.

"Hi, Lorraine," he said.

"What're you doing here?" She looked around as if expecting Alan to be with someone.

"We were drinking a Coke." Alan indicated Stanley at the table.

Stanley got up. "How about a Coke, Lorraine?"

"No, thanks," Lorraine said. "I'm in a hurry."

"Doesn't take long to drink a Coke," Stanley said.

"I don't want a Coke," Lorraine said sharply.

"I got a better idea anyway," Alan said.

"What?" Lorraine's manner was suspicious.

"Let's go someplace and have a beer."

"That's a good idea," Stanley said. "I'll just have two while we're at it."

"How's a couple kids like you gonna buy beer?" Lorraine said. "They won't sell it to you."

Stanley laughed. "I wish I had a dime for every bottle of beer I've bought in this town."

"What'd you do with it?" Lorraine said. "Put it in your piggy bank?"

Stanley's feelings were hurt. "I thought you said you knew her," he said to Alan.

"Aw, she'll go have a beer with us, won't you, Lorraine?" Alan said.

"No, I won't," Lorraine said peevishly. "Now leave me alone." She ground out her cigarette underfoot, walked past Alan, and headed for the door.

"What's she think she is, a queen?" Stanley said to Alan. "She acts like we're gonna make her pay for her own beer."

"She's just playing hard to get," Alan said.

"Yeah, I'll say!" Stanley said. "Maybe we oughtta offered to buy martinis."

"Let's follow her."

They went through the door after her into the late darkness of a summer night that had fallen since they entered the bus station. Lorraine was about half a block down the well lighted sidewalk. They followed her for three blocks. A half-dozen times she stopped to look back, and when she did Alan and Stanley drew up against the side of a building. Apparently satisfied that she was not being followed, Lorraine turned into a little restaurant. The boys went past the place and looked in the window. She was sitting in a low-backed booth with her back to them. They went in. Alan pretended to be surprised to see her.

"Well, look who's here," he said.

Lorraine glared at him. "I told you kids to leave me be,"

she said. "Now you gonna get out of here or you want me to call the cops?"

Alan sat in the booth beside her, and Stanley sat on the opposite side. "We thought maybe you'd changed your mind," Stanley said.

"I didn't change my mind, and I'm not about to," Lorraine said. "So you might as well just turn around and scoot right back to Varoo where you belong."

"We came in to get something to eat," Alan said.

"We can get something to eat if we want to, can't we?" Stanley said.

"You don't have to eat in the same place I do, do you?" Lorraine asked.

"What's the matter with the place?" Alan looked around suspiciously. "Don't tell me they water the coffee."

"If you're going to stay here, you let me out and I'll go someplace else," Lorraine said.

"What's the matter with you?" Stanley said. "You afraid of us?"

Lorraine was scornful at the suggestion. "What makes you think I'm afraid of you?"

"Well, if you want to know the truth," Stanley said, "I kind-a got the impression you're trying to avoid us."

"I'm waiting for someone," Lorraine said. "So beat it."

"Whatta you need with someone else when you got us?" Alan said. "We can do anything anyone else can."

"Twice as many times," Stanley said.

Lorraine glared. "That sounds like a crack to me."

Stanley shrugged and looked injured.

Alan picked up the menu. "Well, what'll we have to eat?" he said in a comradely manner. "Here we can have ground beef, ground steak, or meat loaf. Or would you rather have hamburger?"

But Lorraine didn't answer, and neither did Stanley. They were both looking past him. Alan was aware that someone

had stopped beside the table. He looked up expecting to see a waiter. It was Clyde.

"What're you doin' here?" Clyde's voice was angry.

Alan's answer was the reflex action of a mind momentarily non-functioning. "Nothing."

"Tryin to spy on me, was you? So you could take a big tale home to Mommie?"

"I didn't even know you'd be here," Alan managed.

"Now, look, I've told Mommie this, and I'll tell you." Clyde spoke tensely as one who explains a set of deeply entrenched principles with which there can be no compromise. "I'm not ashamed of anything I do. No one has to sneak around and spy on me behind my back."

"I wasn't spying on you," Alan said.

"Then how come you're here?" Clyde demanded.

There didn't seem to be anything to say. Alan stared dumbly at Stanley. Stanley was looking pop-eyed at Clyde.

It was Lorraine who answered. "They was trying to pick me up."

Alan could have tried all night and never happened upon an explanation so gratifying in the results it produced. Clyde's hostile manner was gone in an instant. "Set over," he said. His voice was almost like back at Walter Sholty's buying everyone a Coke.

Alan moved around the table to sit beside Stanley, and Clyde sat in the vacated spot beside Lorraine.

"So you was tryin' to make your old Dad's girl, was you?" Clyde was highly pleased. "And you too, huh, Stan?"

There weren't many times that Alan had seen Stanley at a loss for words. His confusion now made Alan even more uncomfortable. Only Clyde seemed at ease.

"What'd you figure on doin'?" Two-timing her?" He laughed in appreciation of the picture the words seemed to conjure up for him.

"Well, I don't see anything funny about it," Lorraine said, and Clyde laughed louder.

A waiter came to take their order. Clyde looked at the menu briefly. "How's the cube steak?" he asked.

The waiter was Italian. "Oh, cube steak verra good," he said. "Verrá tender."

"Tender as a banker's heart, I'll bet," Clyde's good humor was phenomenal.

The waiter laughed. He seemed sincerely to like the joke.

Clyde turned to Lorraine. "What'll you have, Hot Lips?"

Lorraine was studying the menu. "Can I have anything I want?"

"Sure," Clyde said. "What the hell? Eat, drink, and make merry. What'll you have, Mary?"

The waiter laughed again. He liked *that* joke too.

"I think I'll have a T-bone," Lorraine said. "I haven't had a T-bone for a long time."

Clyde leaned over to see the menu better. "How much is it?" he asked.

"Two and a half. And that's with salad and two vegetables."

"That's awful cheap for a T-bone," Clyde said. "How is it, Tony? Any good?"

"Yes, T-bone verra good," the waiter said. "Verra tender."

"I tell you what I think I'll do," Clyde said. "I think I'll just have the T-bone too. Can you change that cube steak to a T-bone?"

"Yes, sure." The waiter noted the change on his pad.

"Do you boys want something?" Clyde's tone seemed to invite a negative answer, and both boys shook their heads. "Buy you a hamburger if you want it."

"I'm not hungry," Alan said.

"Me neither," Stanley said. "We just had supper."

"I guess that's all then, Tony," Clyde said to the waiter.

The waiter started away, and Clyde called after him. "Hey, Tony, you push 'em up, huh? We goin' to a picture show pretty soon. You hurry, huh? Ho-kay?"

The waiter nodded, his face broken in an enormous smile. He liked Clyde's Italian dialect too.

Clyde transferred his attention back to Alan and Stanley. "So you two squirts think you're big enough to take on a man's work now, do you? You wake up some morning, and you can't turn over in bed, and right away you think you're a man, huh?"

"Now don't start getting vulgar, Clyde," Lorraine said. "Give me a cigarette." -

Clyde gave her a cigarette and tossed her a paper folder of matches to light it.

"Anyway you're just like your old Dad in one thing," Clyde said to Alan. "You know how to pick 'em." He put an arm around Lorraine's shoulders. "This's the best little lay in town right here. Lots of men half my age'd give their right arm to be in bed with her fifteen minutes, and she saves it all for me. Don't you, Hot Lips?" He made a playful little pass at one of the breasts that extended out past the table top when Lorraine reached across for an ash tray. "Get that thing off the table," Clyde said. "It hain't been cooked yet."

Lorraine slapped lightly at him. "Now stop it, Clyde," she said. She offered an explanation for Clyde's action to Alan: "His manners are terrible sometimes."

Alan felt embarrassed. He looked guardedly at Stanley. Stanley was gaping almost open-mouthed.

"Whenever you think you're *really* men," Clyde said to the two boys, "you stop in sometime and I'll let you see Hot Lips do her pillow dance."

Lorraine was indignant. "You want them thinking I'm an old whore?" she demanded.

"Okay, Hot Lips! Take it easy!" Clyde said. "You'll rip out the striffin', and then you won't be worth a damn."

"Oh, stop swearing," Lorraine said. "Sometimes you're just downright crude."

"Not too crude to buy you pretty dresses though and new shoes, am I?"

They waited fifteen minutes for the food to be served, and Clyde talked incessantly. It was a type of talk that Alan

had abandoned several years ago. But he could remember that it had been a source of great enjoyment about the time he had been in junior high. The idea was to pounce onto a word or phrase that someone else uttered or take some completely innocuous little thing and twist it into something obscene. It was a passing kind of humor that most of the kids no longer found too interesting by the time they reached senior high, but Clyde appeared to dote on it. Everything, even the printed menu, reminded him of something about sex. Alan cringed in his seat, and Lorraine called upon Clyde to stop.

"You'll have these boys thinking we're terrible," she said once as if they were a respectable married couple sitting at home in their living room and Alan and Stanley had come calling.

But Clyde was incorrigible. Alan didn't know whether the remarkable behavior was his father's way of flirting with a younger woman or whether there was some deeper reason that prompted it. At times he had the impression that the performance was a practical demonstration of Clyde's often vaunted prowess as a ladies' man. Either way, the obscenity that passed for humor was so obvious and so juvenile that Alan was disgusted. One of Clyde's jokes reminded him of a time in junior high when Stanley had asked some girl if she would do something for him. The girl asked what it was he wanted her to do, and Stanley handed her a screw that he had worked at all afternoon, when the teacher wasn't looking, to loosen from his desk.

When the food came, Alan stood up. "We better get going now," he said.

"Okay," Clyde said. "And if you boys ever start out to play man again, you just come around and ask your old Dad for a few pointers. I could probably tell you some things you never heard of."

Stanley had scooted over and was out of the booth too. Both boys started for the door, but Clyde called Alan back.

"You can tell Mommie as much about this as you want to," he said. "But you just remember the more you tell her the more you're gonna worry her, and you're not gonna change the way things are at all." He laid a hand on Lorraine's leg so Alan could see. "Your old Dad's a ladies' man, and he always will be. That's the way the good Lord made me—all man. You understand?"

Alan nodded. He understood. It was The Creation again. He started out.

"If you don't understand now, you will someday." Clyde's voice came over Alan's shoulder. "If you're really a *man*, you will."

If you're really a man! Alan walked faster to get away.

In the car on the way home, Stanley said, "Didn't you know she was your old man's . . ." He paused, hunting for the proper word.

"Whore?" Alan suggested for him.

"Well, whatever you want to call it."

"Sure I knew," Alan said. "Only I didn't know I knew."

Stanley looked strangely at him. "What kind-a double talk's that?"

"It's poetry," Alan said. "Free verse."

"I don't get it." Stanley was genuinely puzzled. "Jeez! If you knew your old man was sleeping with her all the time, what'd *you* have to go chasing around after her for?"

"Because I can do anything my old man can!" Alan said fiercely. "I'm as much of a man as he is! Can't you tell? I'm just like him in every way. And it's natural, too, 'cause I'm his son—all man!"

Stanley looked convinced.

CHAPTER NINE

AS BEFITTED IT, Cliff Maddox's garage had its front door opening onto an alley between Oak and Chestnut streets. It was a rough little sheet metal building more reminiscent of the blacksmith shop it had originally been built for than anything else. Here Cliff Maddox plied the mechanic's trade, which he had "picked up," as a service for those who sought to save the few extra dollars that a properly qualified mechanic would have charged. Whether or not Cliff's tinkering was any cheaper in the long run was a matter that had been debated for hours at Vic's poolroom, with no one ever changing anyone else's mind a particle. Because really the issue was not so much a matter of debatable logic as it was a way of life. One was either born with an ingrained sense that he was never likely to get something for nothing, or one was born with an instinct to hunt "bargains." It was largely to this bargain hunting instinct that Cliff Maddox owed the modest success of his mechanic's service. As might be expected, however, Cliff himself was far too materialistic to leave his success completely up to anything as intangible as instinct, however healthy. And so he was continually engaged in a word of mouth campaign, which on occasion had even spilled over into a small ad in the *Western County Herald*, dedicated to the proposition that it was his "lower rent," "lack of fancy gadgets," and "no help to pay" that made his price half of what the same job would cost at either of the two regular garages in town. If an occasional

customer wound up paying new carburetor price for a used one or buying a new set of spark plugs he didn't need—well, that was something else again. That was one of the to be expected risks in "having work done," and the patrons of Maddox's garage took it in stride.

Alan was walking along Chestnut Street one morning when Robbie Hite came running out of the alley pursued by Tod Lofts and Laird Thompson. They grabbed Robbie just a few feet from where Alan stood and dragged him along between them toward Maddox's garage. Robbie swore and fought, but the two hustled his frail body along easily. In the doorway, he grabbed to the side and held on for two full minutes before they could break his fingers loose. But with a final jerk that shook the entire front of the building, they tore him free, and the three of them disappeared inside, where Alan could still hear Robbie swearing. He went in.

Tod and Laird were holding Robbie flat on his back on the oily floor, his legs spread wide apart, his trousers and shorts pulled down nearly to his knees and his shirt tail turned up to expose the entire middle section of his body. Cliff Maddox stood over him looking down at Robbie's nakedness and chewing an enormous cud of tobacco. Robbie thrashed furiously and cursed in his uncontrollably shrill, ragged voice while Tod and Laird held on and laughed in enjoyment of his futile struggles. Three other grinning loafers looked on at the procedure with obvious relish.

"You think you can hit it, Cliff?" one said.

The enormous cud in his mouth kept Cliff from answering, but Tod spoke for him. "He'll hit it. There's not much there to aim at, but he'll hit it."

"Maybe we oughtta put some red paint on it first so it'll show up," one of the men suggested.

But the cud in Cliff's mouth had yielded such a supply of juice that it was seeping out at the corners, and there was no time for the added refinement of red paint. He leaned closer and directed a stream of tobacco juice with great

force and accuracy. It struck Robbie's white body in a nasty, brown cascade that covered the intended portion and ran down between his legs.

"Give 'im another shot, Cliff," Laird Thompson said.

Cliff complied while Alan stood too repelled to make a move and felt a little sick at his stomach. Robbie was sprayed a second time, and Tod and Laird released him. Robbie came to his feet pulling his clothes up over the sticky, brown spittle in which he was bathed. He was crying. The men laughed uncontrollably. Cliff Maddox nearly choked, then spit the cud out and laughed until he was so weak he had to hold onto a bench. Tod sat on the running board of a jacked up car and held his head in both hands.

"You goddam sonofabitches you!" Robbie yelled at them in the most scathing diatribe he knew.

The men laughed louder.

"That'll make it grow, Rob," Laird said.

With his clothes in place again, Robbie grabbed up a small end wrench and threw it at Laird. The wrench missed by inches and crashed into a small square pane of window glass with such force that it passed completely through, causing the glass to shower both inside and out. Cliff Maddox's merriment was gone in an instant.

"Watch what the hell you're doin!" he shouted a warning.

Tod came off the running board in a flying leap and grabbed Robbie by one arm. "Let's give 'im another shot, Cliff," he said.

"Okay," Cliff yelled. "Hold 'im."

Robbie swore and hit the side of Tod's head with his fist. Tod gave a jerk to Robbie's arm and threw him to the floor. He was just straddling him when Alan stepped in. He placed both hands against Tod's side and shoved. Tod's hold on Robbie's arm was loosened, and he staggered a few steps sideways before he went sprawling on the floor. Robbie regained his feet and stood beside Alan. Together they faced the men.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" Cliff demanded of Alan.

"You're a filthy bunch-a sonsofbitches!" Alan's pronouncement was no improvement on the one Robbie had made, but he was too enraged to seek originality.

"We was just havin' a little fun with 'im," Cliff said. "We didn't hurt the bastard."

"You're a yellow livered bunch-a sonsofbitches!" Alan hardly knew what he said. He had never felt such uncontrollable anger.

Laird Thompson took a couple steps forward. "Let's give him a little treatment like we give Hite. Maybe there'll be more there to work on."

Tod stood up. "Let's get 'im!"

"I'll spit on it if you guys get his pants down," Cliff said.

Tod and Laird advanced together, and Alan backed up. Robbie backed with him. The three who had been lookers-on at Robbie's abasement, eager to be amused further but unwilling to become accessories, made no move.

"You've got too big for your britches anyway, Peerman," Laird said. "Maybe we can get you wet enough to shrink a little."

From the corner of his eyes, Alan could see that Robbie and he were being backed into a corner. A few more steps and they would be against the wall. Something moved under his feet, and he looked down. He was standing on a jack handle. He stooped quickly and came up with the piece of metal in his hands. He leaped at Laird and swung the handle with all his strength. Laird jerked back, and Alan's swing missed. The momentum of the blow turned his body all the way around in a complete circle.

"That sonofabitch hain't got any more sense than to kill someonel" Laird's eagerness was gone. His face was fish belly white.

Laird's retreat before Alan's attack left Tod standing alone. He backed up hastily to stand in line with Laird again.

"You guy's gonna get 'im or not?" Cliff demanded.

"Why the hell don't you help us if you wantta get 'im?" Laird demanded.

"Yeah, why don't you?" Alan said. "The first one lays a filthy finger on me gets his head laid open with this jack handle."

Cliff stood undecided for several seconds while no one moved. "Get out of here!" he suddenly shouted at Alan. "Both of you! And don't let me ever see you in here again! If you can't take a little joke, you can stay out!"

"I'll stay out," Alan said. "It stinks in here."

"Get out!" Cliff pointed a dirty finger toward the door.

"You two jerks back up," Alan said to Laird and Tod, stepping forward and swinging the jack handle in front of him.

The two fell back.

"Get out the door, Rob," Alan said. He stood facing the others until Robbie called from the doorway.

"I'm here, Al."

Alan walked sideways to the door without taking his eyes from the men. "Get on out," he said to Robbie.

Robbie went through the door and stood holding it open for Alan. In the open doorway, Alan drew back his arm and threw the jack handle with all his strength at the row of windows over Cliff's workbench. There was a crash as the handle went through carrying glass and a big section of wooden frames along with it. Cliff swore above the sound of breaking glass, and Alan jumped through the doorway beside Robbie. Together they ran down the alley.

Robbie couldn't stop crying. "I'm gonna tell Dad what they done," he sobbed. "He's over paintin' the Candy Kitchen."

Alan went too. They went in the back door. Sammy Hite was alone on a scaffold painting the ceiling of the big back room, which contained nothing but a juke box and was used for dancing. Robbie called up to him.

"Dad."

"That you, Rob?" Sammy continued his painting, appearing to take pleasure in the transformation wrought by his brush on the smoke stained ceiling.

"Yeah. Come down here a minute."

"What for?"

"I wantta show you what them sonsofbitches over at the garage done to me." Robbie's voice cracked, and he began to sob again.

Sammy Hite came shinnying down a ladder, leaving his paint and brush aloft. "What's the matter?"

"A bunch of them took my pants down and spit on me. Right there." Robbie pointed to the offended area, and a shaft of strong morning sun through the open rear door lighted up a dark stain that had soaked through the front of his overalls.

Sammy Hite fell to his knees to get a closer look at his son's injury. His eyes stared and his chin quivered. He was a thin, little man with about the same mentality as Robbie and a misshapen chin that set crooked on the lower part of his face and gave his whole head a lopsided appearance.

"Who done that?" he demanded.

"It was Cliff Maddox spit on me," Robbie said. "Tobacco juice. And Tod Lofts and Laird Thompson held me so he could do it. And I hadn't done a thing to 'em. I was mindin' my own business."

"I know," Sammy said readily, and Alan gained the impression that something of the kind might have happened to Sammy at some time.

"They'd have done it again, but Al here stopped 'em," Robbie said.

"You see 'em do it?" Sammy asked Alan.

Alan nodded. "I got there just as they did it. I didn't have a chance to stop them."

Sammy got off his knees abruptly. "We'll have 'em arrested!" he declared. "They hain't pushin' me around like I was dirt. I'm just as good as they are." He appeared to in-

terpret Robbie's abuse as having happened to himself. "We'll get Herm Blazek."

Sammy Hite charged out the door, his deformed little chin quivering like a grasshopper's antenna, and with Robbie and Alan at his heels. They found Herman Blazek, day policeman, leaning against the front of Summer's drug store.

"I wantta have Cliff Maddox and Laird Thompson and Tod Lofts arrested," Sammy declared without preliminaries.

Herm Blazek straightened up. "What's the matter, Sammy?"

"Look what they done to Rob." Sammy motioned. "Show 'im, Rob."

Robbie spread his legs to show the extent of the stain that now covered a sizable area in the front of his overalls.

Herm looked blank. "What happened?"

"They spit on 'im," Sammy said. "Tobacco spit. They took his pants down."

"Are you sure it was Cliff Maddox?" It was a stupid question.

Sammy turned to Alan. "Al saw 'em, didn't you, Al?"

"Sure I saw them," Alan said. "In at Maddox's garage not more'n ten minutes ago."

"Well now I'm sure there must be more to it than that." Herm was bringing his wits to bear. "Cliff Maddox wouldn't do something like that just to be doin' it."

"I saw him do it," Alan declared. "They was gonna do the same thing to me till I swung a jack handle at them."

"They're always pickin' on my boy," Sammy said. "Doin' something to devil 'im. Well, they've gone too far this time. I want all three of 'em arrested."

"Okay, Sammy, okay," Herm said as if he were humoring the man. "Come on, we'll go see what Cliff and the other boys got to say about it if you want to."

Alan fell in behind the others, and Herm turned to face him. "You don't need to go, Peerman. We can get along without you."

Alan knew why Herm Blazek didn't want him along. He

was going to put the Hites off someway, not do anything about it. And Alan didn't want the Hites put off. He wanted to see Cliff Maddox and Tod Lofts and Laird Thompson pay a fine for the thing they had done to Robbie and had almost done to him. "How come I can't go along?" he demanded. "I was there when they did it. That makes me a witness."

Herm looked undecided. He wheeled wordlessly and started off again followed by the Hites. Alan trailed doggedly behind.

The group was still in the garage just as it had been when Robbie and Alan ran out the door. Cliff was sweeping broken glass off his workbench to the floor.

"Mornin', Cliff," Herm said easily, nodding toward the other men at the same time.

"Mornin', Herm," Cliff said. He looked threateningly toward Robbie and Alan. "I thought I told you two to stay outta here!"

"Sammy says some of you boys took Rob's pants down and spit on it for 'im," Herm said good-naturedly. "What happened?"

"We was havin' a little fun with 'im," Cliff said. "Just kind-a jokin' around. We wasn't doin' a thing to hurt 'im, was we, boys?" He looked to Tod and Laird for confirmation.

"Hell, no!" Laird said.

"Then the crazy half-witted bastard throwed a wrench through the window there." Cliff pointed to the single pane of glass that Robbie had broken. "Then this other crazy sonofabitch"—Cliff indicated Alan—"throwed a jack handle and cleared out a whole section of glass, panes and all. Lookee there. That'll cost me fifteen or twenty bucks."

"That's about what I figured." Herm turned to Sammy. "You see, Sammy? They was just kiddin' around with Rob, and he lost his temper. You better forget about it before Cliff here has you payin' for his window."

"What about what they done to 'im?" Sammy demanded.

"They didn't have any right to do a thing like that to my boy. Not a right in the world."

"They didn't do anything you can arrest 'em for," Herm said. "There's no law against jokin'. They didn't know Rob'd get mad."

"What's he wanna do? Arrest us for havin' a little joke, for Christ sake?" Cliff said.

"Yeah. Sammy wants me to arrest all three of you." Herm gave Cliff a broad wink.

Cliff laughed contemptuously. "They better all get outta here before I swear out a warrant against 'em for destroyin' property."

"Well, whatta you say, Sammy?" Herm said. "You wantta forget the whole thing? If they promise not to play any more jokes on Rob?"

Alan could see that Sammy was wavering. "It wasn't any joke!" He intruded himself into the talk. "I saw it."

"What would you call it then?" Herm demanded.

"It was assault and battery." Alan used a term he had read in newspapers and was gratified at the impression his assertion appeared to make.

"You're pretty smart, hain't you, Peerman?" Cliff said. "How'd you like to have me slap a suit on your old man to pay for them windows you broke?"

"It might even be assault to commit a lewd act." Alan was into legalities over his head for sure now, but the new charge had a good solid ring to it, and he could see that no one was inclined to treat the matter as a joke any longer.

"Come on," Herm said to Sammy. "We'll go down to the office and see what Bill says about it. He's the Chief. If he wants to let you swear out a warrant, that's up to him. And if he wants to throw you all into a cell for disturbin' the peace, that's up to him too."

Herm walked angrily out, and once again Sammy and Robbie followed, with Alan bringing up the rear. Alan could

see that Sammy was beginning to be afraid he had got into something that might backfire.

Bill Tillney was sitting in the police station with his feet on the desk. Metal lettering over the visor on his cap said Chief of Police. Alan had never seen Bill Tillney with the hat off.

"We're havin' a little trouble, Bill," Herm said.

"Yeah?" Chief Tillney took his feet down. "What's the matter?"

"Sammy here wants me to arrest Cliff Maddox and Laird Thompson and that Lofts boy for a little joke they played on Rob a while ago."

"What Lofts boy is that?" Chief Tillney was going at things backwards, Alan thought.

"Virgil's boy."

"Oh."

"They took Rob's pants down up at the garage a while ago and spit on it for 'im. Kind-a playin' with 'im, you know. But Rob got mad and throwed a wrench through one of Cliff's windows. Then Peerman here got mad and throwed a jack handle through a whole row of windows. About twenty bucks worth o' damage Cliff figures. I just come from there. Looks to me like Cliff got the worst of it. But Sammy here wants me to arrest 'em."

"They spit tobacco juice on Rob," Sammy spoke up. "He wasn't doin' a thing to 'em, and they spit tobacco juice all over 'im. Show 'im, Rob."

Once again Robbie exhibited the extent of his injury, but Alan could see it was a hopeless gesture. Bill Tillney's mind was already made up. He merely glanced at the front of Robbie's overalls and then turned back to Herm.

"What's Cliff say about it?"

"He's willin' to pay for the windows hisself and forget the whole thing if everyone else is."

Chief Tillney scratched his chin and appeared to look judicious for a few seconds. Then he turned to Sammy as if

he had carefully weighed the thing in his mind and had arrived at a decision. "Looks to me like Cliff's bein' pretty fair with you, Sammy," he said. "He could cause you a lot-a trouble about them broken windows if he wanted to. I believe you better just forget it, don't you?"

Sammy was plainly at a loss. He had appealed his case to the highest authority he knew anything about, the law. The law as represented by Chief of Police Bill Tillney. And that authority had ruled against him. Alan could imagine Herm Blazek and Bill Tillney getting together with the three at the garage and having a big laugh over it.

"How come Cliff Maddox could cause Sammy trouble about those broken windows?" Alan demanded. "I'm the one broke them. Rob didn't."

Chief Tillney faced Alan as a more worthy opponent. The patronizing manner he had used with Sammy was gone. "I thought you both broke 'em."

"Rob broke one little pane of glass it'll cost about a dollar to put back," Alan said. "I'm the one broke all the rest of them. When that bunch of crumbs started in to take my pants down and do me like they did Rob. If Cliff Maddox wants to make someone pay for his windows, I'm the one did it. What they did to Rob was assault to commit a lewd act, and Mr. Hite here wants to swear out a warrant against them. Don't you, Mr. Hite?"

"Sure," Sammy said, but he didn't sound so positive as he had in the garage.

Chief Tillney ignored Sammy. He glared at Alan. "Now you look here, Peerman. You're nothing but a smart aleck. You've done nothing but cause us trouble here all summer long. We could-a had you in jail a dozen times for speedin' and runnin' stop lights and I don't know what the hell all. We would-a too if it wasn't for old Clyde. Now you come in here blowin' your top and talkin' about something you don't know a damned thing about like you're a big shot lawyer or something. Tryin' to get Sammy here in trouble. I'm gon-

na give all three of you just one minute to get out that door before I lock you up for destroyin' property. Now git!"

The injustice made Alan reckless. He would let them shoot him before he would retreat. "Sam Hite is a taxpayer in this town," he said. "He's got a right to police protection just like everyone else, and you're the Chief of Police. Supposed to be. He comes to you with proof that an assault has been committed against his son. Cliff Maddox even admits it. But you refuse to do anything. You won't even let Mr. Hite swear out a warrant when he wants to."

Chief Tillney's face was red with anger. "Look, you're just a slick-eared, goddam kid! You're not gonna tell *me* how to run things around here."

"And you're just a policeman! You're not supposed to judge whether someone's guilty or not. That's up to the court to do." Alan felt he was winning as far as words were concerned. But words wouldn't move walls.

"You've got another fifteen seconds," Chief Tillney said. "You better get goin', Sammy."

Sammy went toward the door with Robbie following, and Alan knew the fight had been lost. Then he suddenly remembered a television show he had seen once. Maybe there was still a chance.

"This'll make a good story for the paper this evening," he said. "Chief of Police refuses to let citizen swear out a warrant for assault."

Chief Tillney laughed. "If you think you can get Ben Clawson to print a story like that, you go right ahead, wise guy."

"Ben Clawson's on vacation." Alan fired the thrust with a feeling of exultation. "Howard Stirche's in charge of the paper."

The silence that followed was complete and ominous. Sammy and Robbie were gone. Herm and Chief Tillney glared, but both remained silent. Nothing in the room functioned except the clock on the wall, which swung its

brass pendulum and measured off time that had suddenly become heavy. Alan returned their glare until he felt foolish. Then he turned abruptly and went out.

Ben Clawson's annual two-weeks vacation had begun two days before. As chief reporter and the only one in the office who had any formal training in newspaper work, charge of the *Western County Herald* had fallen to Howard Stirche. He had even taken over Ben Clawson's office for the period of stewardship. Alan went in hesitantly. Howard was sitting behind the editor's big desk. He looked up and smiled a welcome.

"Well, come in, J. P.," he said facetiously as if Alan were a visiting millionaire. "How'd you like my office? Sell you a gold mine or something?"

"I got a story for you," Alan said, and left a little pause. Then he said, "If you wantta print it."

Howard dropped his levity. "Why wouldn't I want to print it? I'll print it if it's news."

"Maybe you better hear what it is first," Alan said.

"Okay. Tell me."

Alan told him. His voice cracked with emotion in places, but he had the satisfaction of seeing Howard's eyes run the gamut from interest to sympathy to shock and finally turn into anger. He left nothing out, and he added nothing. He was careful to make every statement accurate. By the time he finished, Howard was squirming in his chair. Alan knew how he felt. It was the kind of thing that made it hard to sit still.

"Well, that's it," Alan finished. "Are you gonna print it?"

"Whatever made you think I wouldn't?" Howard said.

"It's gonna make some people awful mad," Alan said. "Including Ben Clawson. He's a good friend of Bill Tilney."

"I don't care whose good friend he is!"

Alan was thrilled at the anger in Howard's voice. Thrilled that an indignity to simple-minded, insignificant Sammy and

Robbie Hite could be the concern of someone besides himself. Someone who was in position to do something about it. Alan felt a warm bond spread between himself and Howard Stirche, the bond of mutual indignation over an unjust act. The sensation was so tangible that Alan could feel it in his head. It was like being dizzy. He couldn't have stood up if he had tried.

Howard reached for a sheet of paper and rolled it into the typewriter. "We'll make an editorial out of it," he said, and began to type.

Alan sat watching the look of concentration on Howard's face for what seemed a long time. Then it came to him that his part in the affair was done. He was doing no good sitting there. He arose to go out.

"Stick around till I'm through, will you, Alan?" Howard said. "I might need to ask you something before I'm finished."

Alan sat down again. Fifteen minutes went past, and Howard hadn't said anything. He continued to type. One page was filled and another begun. There was a knock at the door, and Connie Ferris opened it.

"Cliff Maddox is here to see you, Mr. Stirche," she said without coming in.

Howard looked toward Alan and blinked. "Send him in."

Connie Ferris stepped back, and Cliff Maddox came into the little office followed by Laird Thompson and Tod Lofts. Cliff scowled at sight of Alan but came on to the desk. Laird and Tod stopped just inside the door, and Laird leaned against it.

"I'm Cliff Maddox," Cliff said to Howard.

Howard nodded. "I'm just writing an editorial about you, Mr. Maddox."

"I thought maybe you was," Cliff said. "That's why I'm here. It don't seem to me like what happened's important enough to get into the paper. It was just a little joke."

Howard stood up. "If you call your abuse of a young boy and your attempted abuse of another one a little joke, you

have a strange sense of humor, Mr. Maddox," he said. "But the thing I'm most concerned about is the way our police department refused to act in the interest of the injured party."

"Injured party, hell!" Cliff was contemptuous. "All he's gotta do's take a bath, and you couldn't tell anything'd ever happened. He's nothin' but a feeble-minded, half-baked kid anyway."

"As far as the law's concerned, everyone should be equal," Howard said.

"Is that right?"

Alan recognized Cliff's sneering cliché as an indication that his brief attempt at reason was ended.

"That's the point of the editorial I'm writing," Howard said.

Cliff leaned over the desk, his dirty hands resting on the top. "I wouldn't print that editorial if I was you, young fella."

Howard met his look without flinching. "Are you threatening me?"

Cliff shook his head craftily. "Hu-huh, and I got plenty of witnesses to back me up. All I'm doin' is givin' you a list of reasons why it wouldn't be good business for you to write a story about what happened at my garage this morning. First, there's six men, all over twenty-one except Tod Lofts. And all willin' to testify about what went on. On the other side you got two seventeen-year-old kids. And one of 'em's a half-wit. In the second place, it's already been investigated by the police, and they're satisfied. So why shouldn't you be? And in the next place, Ben Clawson wouldn't print the story if he was here, so you hain't got any business printin' it either."

"Now you listen to me," Howard said. "I'm editor of this paper while Ben Clawson's away, and I'll print whatever I feel like."

Cliff smirked into Howard's face. "You hain't been in Varoo very long, have you?"

"Not very."

"Maybe you don't know how we do things around here."

"Maybe you don't know around here how they do things other places."

"I'm not threatenin', mind you," Cliff said. "I'm just tellin' you you gotta be careful what you put in the paper. Folks might not like it."

It was a threat. But couched in words that could be made to appear harmless if it was ever necessary to repeat them in court.

Cliff Maddox straightened up. "Think it over."

He turned away, and Laird Thompson held the door open for him. The three went out.

Howard sat down behind Ben Clawson's big desk again. He tilted back in the swivel chair and looked at the ceiling. He was doing some hard thinking.

"They were bluffing," Alan said. "They wouldn't do anything."

"I don't know, Alan," Howard said slowly. "You never can tell about riff-raff like that. Logically they wouldn't do anything. They *shouldn't*. But you never know. You can't tell what they'll do."

"You're gonna print it, aren't you?" Alan said.

"I don't know."

Howard picked up the sheet of paper he had typed and looked it over. He rolled the other sheet out of the typewriter and held a sheet in each hand, looking from one to the other. Abruptly he brought the two sheets together and wadded them into a ball. He threw them savagely into the wastebasket.

Alan stood up.

Howard stood up too. "One man can't change the world, Alan," he said. "If the police don't care, and Ben Clawson and no one else cares, why should I care? What difference

would it make if I did? I'm just one man. A miserable little editor on a crummy little paper while the boss takes a two weeks' summer vacation."

"I care," Alan said. "And Robbie cares, and Sam Hite. That makes four of us. How many does it take?"

Howard shook his head. "We'd be getting into a lot of trouble for nothing. I've seen things like this before."

"You're afraid of Cliff Maddox," Alan said.

"I wouldn't be afraid of Cliff Maddox or anyone if it were important enough," Howard declared fiercely. "But it's not important enough to run the risk of getting beaten up in an alley or having my apartment burned down some night when I'm asleep. That's why I can't go ahead and print it. It's not important enough."

"Robbie Hite was mistreated and made a fool of. And they tried to do the same thing to me," Alan said. "Isn't that important enough for a story in the paper? Isn't it important that the police laughed about it and wouldn't do anything?"

"It's important, Alan," Howard said miserably. "Sure it's important. But it's no important *enough*."

"You're afraid of what Cliff Maddox'll do to you," Alan said.

"I'm sorry you feel that way about it, Alan," Howard said. "When you're a little older, you'll realize there's lots of injustice in the world. There always has been. One man can't do a thing about it. Even four men can't."

Alan went out and banged the door shut behind him.

CHAPTER TEN

ONE OF THOSE most perplexed by the great change that appeared in Alan that seventeenth summer was Stanley Mack. Stanley had always felt that Alan and he were two alike. They laughed at the same things, they liked and disliked the same shows and the same television programs and the same people, everything. They went everywhere together, and when there was no place else to go, Alan came to Stanley's house, and they watched television. The Peermans didn't have a television set. Stanley's folks liked Alan and enjoyed having him in the house. They were always saying, "You two go ahead and enjoy each other's company while you're kids. Things'll be different when you grow up." Stanley didn't know why his folks said that. He was confident that Alan and he would always be inseparable.

When the great change came in Alan, Stanley had an uncomfortable feeling. First was when Alan dared Ketch Martin to get into the car with him and race a fast passenger train from Cohn's crossing into town. Ketch had never taken a dare in his life, and he got in. It was a nip and tuck race all the way into town with Alan hitting speeds up to ninety miles a hour. They reached the crossing just seconds ahead of the train. It didn't appear that there could possibly be time to get across, but Alan told Ketch to hang on, he was going to give it a try. They made it by a margin so close that Ketch was almost too weak to stand when Alan finally pulled up in front of Vic's and collected the dollar and a half

he had bet with Jack Deno. Stanley, who had witnessed the whole thing, was shaken. It was the first thing Alan had ever done that Stanley wouldn't have dared do. The second thing was Alan's senseless feat of holding onto the railroad trestle and letting the Memphis Flyer run over him. And after that had come a succession of altogether incomprehensible happenings, the affair with May Tarble ranking close to the top for sheer lunacy.

One thing Stanley had always enjoyed in his association with Alan was the long talks they would have. The talks were never planned; they were likely to occur anytime the two of them were alone, spontaneous outbreaks of the complete understanding that existed between them. Once when Alan stayed all night with Stanley they hadn't gone to sleep until four o'clock in the morning. Just talking. And several times after double dates when one was bringing the other home, they would park in front of the house and talk for as long as three hours. These midnight conversations covered an amazing range of topics, whatever happened to be on their minds at the time. It was usually something about girls and sex or some current happening or what they planned to do some day. At such times Stanley blabbed like a seven year old. He had never done or said or thought a thing in his life that he would hesitate a minute to tell Alan during one of these talkfests. And he always felt that Alan was the same with him—until that seventeenth summer. They still talked, and it was during the talks that Alan seemed more like his old self than at any other time. Yet Stanley had the feeling that Alan was holding back. Something bothered him. Stanley tried to draw him out and felt that he had almost succeeded on occasion. But always Alan would draw back and keep the thing, whatever it was, locked inside him, secret and dark and festering.

The way Alan stopped going with Carol Hibble that summer was a strange thing. Ever since all of them had been in sixth grade together, Carol had been Alan's special

girl. There had been others, of course, like the girl from Chicago who had come visiting next door to Stanley's a couple summers ago, but always Carol Hibble was the one Alan went back to. Alan had given her a Christmas present the year they entered junior high, they had worn matched sweaters one year in high school, and Alan had given her his class ring and taken it back again three or four different times. Stanley knew for sure that Alan thought a lot of Carol. He probably knew it better than Carol did, Stanley reflected.

One Saturday night pretty close to what was the end of the seventeenth summer Alan had a date with Carol, and Stanley was to be with Irma Clarey. They were on the way to Irma's house in Stanley's car. Alan seemed even more preoccupied than usual.

"I think this'll be my last date with Irm," Stanley said.

"How come?" Alan didn't sound really interested the way he once would have. He was making conversation.

"Aw, she'll hold still for anybody," Stanley said. "I found out yesterday she stayed all night in a motel with Buddy Haslit last winter."

"Okay," Alan said. "So that's Buddy Haslit and Jack Deno. Just two. That's not bad."

"I don't mind Deno so much," Stanley said. "But that Buddy Haslit. He's a slob. I don't know why I can't get a girl like you got."

Alan seemed to be unaccountably offended. "Whatta you mean by that?"

"I mean a nice girl," Stanley said. "Like Carol."

"You think Carol Hibble's never been made?"

"I know she hasn't."

"What makes you so damned sure? You think I been going with her all this time just to hold her hand? What kind-a guy you think I am?"

Alan's belligerence was inexplicable, and it had happened

so fast that Stanley was confused. "What'd I say?" he demanded. "I just said Carol Hibble is a nice girl."

"If you think it's because I didn't try, you're crazy," Alan declared. "I wrestled her around on that Clinton trip till my arms were black and blue. I showed you where she pinched me."

"I know you did," Stanley said.

"Well, then stop trying to make out I'm some kind-a queer or something that never lays a hand on a girl when he's out with her."

The outburst was so unreasonable that Stanley nearly missed his turn onto Beech Street. "What's the matter with you, Al?" he said. "I never said anything like that at all."

"Well, it sounded like it to me," Alan said.

"Jesus!" Stanley said. "I'd be the last guy in the world to say there's anything queer about you."

But Alan didn't seem to feel that he had made his point. "Now that you've brought it up, I tell you what I've decided. I'm gonna either get into that, or I'm gonna quit going with her. Then you can have her if that's what you want. See if you can do any better with her than I have."

"I brought it up?" Stanley said. "I didn't bring up anything."

"I'll put it up to her tonight," Alan went on. "I'll tell her we're all four going to a motel, and she can either go or we're through. Will Irm go if you ask her?"

"Irm'll go if anybody asks her," Stanley said. "But you're crazy, Al. You don't wantta break up with Carol over something like that. She's nuts about you."

"If she's nuts about me, let her show it," Alan said. "I'm tired having everyone think I'm a freak of some kind."

"Nobody thinks you're a freak. What's the matter with you?"

"What the hell you think a boy and a girl go together for?" Alan demanded.

Stanley was confused again. He stammered. "I . . . I

. . . well, I suppose so they can get married sometime."

"They go together because one's a boy and one's a girl," Alan said. "Otherwise two boys might as well go together, or two girls. So if that's why they're going together they're freaks if they don't make the most of it. That's what any *real* man'd do."

"Boy-o-boy, All" Stanley said. "You're really mixed up."

"Did *you* ever go with a girl more'n six times without making her?" Alan demanded.

"I just never went with a girl I liked," Stanley said. "And if I don't like them, I figure I might as well get something for my trouble while I'm out with them. That's why I'm like that."

"Okay, that's why I'm like that too," Alan said. "You're no different from me."

"But you like Carol."

"Okay, then that's all the more reason we should sleep together—if we're normal."

They were to Irma's house by then, and the conversation was ended. They picked up Irma and then Carol and went to the movie. Afterwards they drank a Coke at the Candy Kitchen and danced to the music of the juke box in the back room. Through it all, Alan remained silent and brooding, his temper ready to break out at the slightest provocation. Twice he would have got into an argument with Carol, but she gave up both times and passed it off the best she could. After the fourth dance, Alan suggested that they go for a ride, and nothing would do but that they must leave immediately.

On the highway, Stanley drove with one hand on Irma's leg and listened to the sounds of wrestling in the back seat. There would be a succession of grunts and heavy breathing and whispering and then the sound of Alan's being slapped. Every time Irma would turn her head to see what was going on Stanley would kiss her, and in so doing would turn her

eyes to the front again. Finally he wedged her head up against his own and held it close so she couldn't move.

Things became so turbulent in the back seat that Carol gave up any attempt to keep it secret. There was the sound of a slap, and then Carol's angry voice:

"Don't you ever dare do that again, Alan Peerman!"

Alan's voice sounded equally angry. "Whatta you think you are? Twelve years old playing teeter-totter?"

"You're the one acting like twelve years old," Carol said.

"I've had about all this I can take," Alan said. "I been going with you for six years now."

"When you couldn't find anyone else to go with!" Carol said.

"Why do you think I kept coming back?"

"Well, if you were coming back for *that*, you might as well have saved yourself the trouble."

"I came back because I kept thinking sometime you'd realize you're a girl and I'm a boy."

"You don't have to act like that just because you're a boy."

"I'm just like every other boy in the world. And man. No different."

Carol was derisive. "There are nice boys in the world."

"Queers you mean," Alan said.

"You mean to tell me just because a boy treats a girl nice there's something wrong with him?" Carol demanded.

"When you're as old as we are, and a boy and girl go together, and the boy doesn't get anything out of it except a goodnight kiss and a little rub now and then, there's something wrong with him."

"You're crazy!" Carol said.

"Okay," Alan said. "But that's the way it is with everyone else in the world, and that's the way it is with us from now on."

"What does that mean?" There was a subtle change in Carol's voice, no hint of derision now.

"We'll get us a coupla motel rooms right now," Alan said. "All four of us. Whatta you say, Stan?"

Stanley was startled at the abruptness with which he had been catapulted into the argument. He knew that staying all night in a motel would appeal to Irma, but he wasn't sure if Irma would admit it in the presence of Carol. Sometimes when you got two girls together like that they were funny. Alan knew that. He shouldn't have made the whole thing so blunt.

"I don't know," Stanley said, feeling a little silly. "How about you?" he asked Irma and gave her leg a little squeeze.

Irma had the look in her eyes all right, but she said, "Don't ask me to do a thing like that, Stan, honey," as if it were the first time he had ever brought the subject up.

Stanley knew that was what she'd say. Any girl would when the other girl in the car was putting up the resistance that Carol was. And then Stanley had an idea. "We don't have to decide right now, do we?" he said. "Let's say next Saturday night we do it. About Wednesday, Al and I'll call you girls on the phone. You can think about it and let us know then. That'd be okay, wouldn't it, Al?"

Alan seemed to like the idea. "Okay, that's the way we'll do it." He turned to Carol. "Next Wednesday when I phone you, all I'll say is how about a date for Saturday night. And you don't have to ask where or anything about it. You'll just know that if we go out, it'll be to rent a room and stay all night. If you don't wantta do it, you just say no. And that'll be all."

"All what?" Carol sounded frightened.

"All of a beautiful six-year friendship that was strictly platonic," Alan said. "And strictly for the birds."

Stanley didn't know what platonic meant, but he recognized the tone of finality in Alan's voice.

"Well, I can tell you now what the answer'll be," Carol said. "It'll be no."

They left it that way, and the matter wasn't mentioned

again until Stanley and Irma were alone in the back seat down by the railroad stockyards after dropping Carol and Alan off at their houses.

"You know why I said what I did about renting a room, don't you, honey?" Irma said. "I couldn't say I'd do it if she didn't."

"Sure, I know," Stanley said. "You better take your hose off if you don't wantta get them torn."

"It's all right, honey," Irma said. "They're old anyhow."

That Wednesday evening Alan called Carol from the Candy Kitchen. He insisted that Stanley come inside the phone booth with him and even held the phone so Stanley could hear what Carol said. He said he wanted Stanley to hear her say no so Stanley would know first hand why they had broken up. But Carol said yes. There was no hedging around or squirming or anything about it. Alan asked her point-blank, and Carol answered just as directly. Stanley was jubilant. He foresaw a tremendous Saturday night. But Alan didn't appear elated at all.

"What's the matter?" Stanley asked him. "You got what you wanted, didn't you?"

"You damned right," Alan said grimly. "I'd oughtta done it a long time ago. A *real man* would have."

It was still bound up in Alan's mind someway with being a *real man*, whatever that was, and Stanley was more than ever aware of the change Alan had undergone within the last year. He simply wasn't the same person.

When Saturday night came, they had Clyde's car, and Alan drove like a madman. The minute they had picked the girls up, he headed east through town where there was a whole string of motels out by the state line.

"Don't you think we oughtta get a drink or something first?" Stanley suggested.

"Who wants a drink?" Alan said. "You thirsty?"

"Maybe the girls are," Stanley said.

"You thirsty?" Alan asked Carol.

Carol said she wasn't.

"You thirsty, Irm?" Alan asked.

"Not very," Irma said, and Stanley sank back into the seat to watch the summer night go flashing past the car windows like it was being chased.

Alan drove eighty most of the way.

"Why're you driving so fast?" Carol asked.

"What's the matter? You trying to squirm out of it?" Alan said.

And that was all they said to each other for fifteen miles. Alan turned in at a little red brick motel set back a distance from the road and without as much neon as most of the others. He stopped about the middle where a sign said office and turned off the ignition.

"Let's go in and see what they got, Stan," he said.

"Just call us Mr. and Mrs. Richard Merryweather," Stan said airily. He started to get out.

"This okay with you?" Alan asked Carol.

"I suppose so," Carol said.

"Well, don't be noble about it," Alan told her. "Is this all right, or isn't it?"

"Yes, it's all right, Alan," she said.

Alan snorted. "Now you're being long-suffering."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Carol was almost crying.

"Look, do you wantta do this or not?"

"Yes! I do if *you* do."

"*You* do if *I* do? It's all for *me*, huh?"

"Stop riding her, will you?" Stanley said. "She's willing to do it."

Carol started to cry.

"Oh, for Christ sake! Now she's bawling!" Alan said.

"It's your fault," Stanley said. "You been picking on her ever since she got in the car."

"I don't want her doing me any favors," Alan said. "If she's gonna be noble about it, we'll just call the whole thing off."

"Call it off?" Stanley saw the whole wonderful night fading away before his eyes. "You're crazy. We're here now, and everyone's ready. Why call it off?"

"Then make her quit crying," Alan said.

"Quit crying, Carol," Stanley said. "Please quit crying."

Carol cried harder.

"See if you can make her quit," Stanley said to Irma.

Irma scooted forward and put an arm across the seat around Carol's shoulders. "There's nothing to cry about, kid," she said. "It's not so bad."

"I can't help it," Carol sobbed.

"Then we're going home right now," Alan declared, starting the motor.

"I'm willing to do anything you wantta do, Alan," Carol sobbed, "but I can't stop crying."

Alan backed up in a shower of rocks and then shot forward in a bigger shower. Tires screamed when he swerved onto the pavement. On the way back to town there were the sounds the tires made, the sounds of Carol's crying, and the night rushing past outside.

Forty minutes after they left it, they were back in front of Carol's house again. Alan opened the door wordlessly, and Carol got out. Alan took her arm and walked beside her to the house while Stanley and Irma watched from the back seat. At the door, Alan did the strangest thing of all. He gathered Carol to him and kissed her gently, almost reverently, on the forehead. Then he let her go and stepped back.

"I won't be back any more," he told her.

Carol's sobbing had subsided a little. Now it started up again. Alan left her like that and came back to the car. The last Stanley saw of Carol, she was standing there crying and looking after them as they pulled away from the curb.

"You oughtta be shot doing her that way," Stanley said.

"I did what anyone would-a done," Alan said. "It's not my fault a man's made the way he is."

"Whatta we do now, man?" Stanley said. "It's nine o'clock."

"I don't know," Alan said. "Guess I'll play some snooker in at Vic's."

"How about lending us your car a minute?"

"What for?"

"Guess."

"Oh," Alan said. "Okay. I'll get out at Vic's, and you can pick me up there when you're through."

"Well, bully for you!" Stanley said in mock enthusiasm.

In front of Vic's, Alan got out. Stanley transferred to the front seat, with Irma beside him, and headed Clyde's car for the stockyards.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE FOLLOWING Friday Alan was late getting his papers addressed. By five minutes after five there was no one left in the office besides himself and Howard. As he stacked papers into a box, Howard came back.

"Working late this evening, aren't you?" he said.

"A little," Alan said.

"That's the way to succeed." Howard made a little do or die gesture with clenched fist. "You'll be owning the place first thing you know."

Alan didn't say anything, and Howard became serious.

"I been thinking about that Cliff Maddox thing a few weeks

ago, Alan. You were right about it. I should have run that editorial. I'm sorry I didn't."

"Aw, that's okay," Alan said. "Forget it."

"Does that mean I'm forgiven?"

"Sure. What's to forgive?"

"Then I invite you up tonight to eat pizza," Howard said. "I've found a pizza mix that turns out perfect every time."

"I'm going someplace with Stanley tonight."

"And tomorrow night too, I suppose."

"Yeow, as a matter of fact we are." Alan continued to stack his papers without looking at Howard.

"Alan, I been wanting to talk to you for a long time," Howard said. "You haven't given me much chance."

"You're talking now, aren't you?"

"This is a little hard to get into cold. I thought the pizza might warm things up. Then I could say what I want to, and you could catch up on the novel while you're there. I just got two chapters to go."

Howard's insistence was annoying. Alan turned impatiently. "I wish you'd stop inviting me to come up all the time. I got other things to do. I'm not any literary critic anyway; I don't know anything about novels. Ask someone else." Alan didn't intend to be so blunt, but the words just came.

Howard was embarrassed. He kneaded his knuckles as he talked. "I know you're not any critic, Alan. I just thought you might enjoy reading the novel. You used to. Anyway I thought you did. You seemed to."

"Well, now I got other things to do. Interesting things." Howard winced, but Alan had to make it plain to him once and for all.

"I'm sorry," Howard said. "I won't bother you any more. I guess I was just lonesome."

"No wonder you're lonesome," Alan said. "The way you live like a hermit. You could have friends if you wanted to. Connie Ferris right up there in front'd be tickled to death to go someplace with you if you'd just ask her."

Howard's embarrassment changed to anger. "You've made your point," he said. "I won't ask you up any more if you won't try to tell me how to run my life. Okay?"

"Suits me fine."

"Finel!" Howard walked quickly to the front and out the door leaving Alan in the office alone.

After mailing his papers, Alan stopped at Vic's. Ketch Martin was trying to talk Jack Deno into something.

"Hell, boy," Ketch was saying, "this's the cutest little bitch ever put on shoes."

"So's Cleta Malvern," Deno said.

"But you can take out Cleta Malvern anytime."

"Okay, this's the time. Tonight. I've gotta take her. We made the date clear last week."

"Break it."

"Break it, hell! To take out Frances Pragg? Bull!"

"Frances Pragg's one-a the best lookin' girls in this county."

"What's this Frances Pragg routine all at once? Why're you workin' so hard to get a date for Frances Pragg?"

"Because I got a date with her sister, and one of 'em won't go unless they both do."

"Well, talk to someone else. I got a girl. Wtith everything." Deno made a descriptive gesture.

"Hell, they all got that," Ketch said. "Only Frances Pragg's got more of it."

"Cleta's got all I want," Deno said.

"How about you, Tod?" Ketch asked Tod Lofts. "You wantta date tonight? I'll furnish the car and the gas and the girl. All you gotta bring's the body."

"Frances Pragg?" Tod asked.

"Yeah."

"Not me," Tod said. "She's twenty-seven years old."

"Okay," Ketch said. "So what? Experience oughtta count for something." He looked at Alan. "How about you, Al?"

Alan shook his head. "Nothing doing." Then he had an idea. "I tell you who you can get though. You can ask him."

"Who?"

"Howard Stirche."

It took Ketch a few seconds to recall who Howard Stirche was. "You mean that guy down at the *Herald* office?"

"Sure. He's just about Frances Pragg's age."

Jack Deno laughed. "Sure, Ketch," he said. "Then if neither one-a the Pragg girls'll sleep with you, you always got something to fall back on."

Ketch glared. "Whatta you mean?"

Howard Stirche's a queer."

"How do you know?" Ketch said.

"He's just shooting off his mouth again," Alan said.

"He's a queer if I ever saw one." Deno spoke with the conviction of one who wants to assure himself. "The way he talks, the way he acts. What the hell else *could* he be?"

"You don't know anything about Howard Stirche," Alan said.

"There's something funny about him," Deno said. "How come he left that paper in Linway to come here?"

"Why does anyone ever leave any place?" Alan felt that his retort was a little thin. Deno's question was exactly the same one Alan had asked Howard that first Sunday they ate together in the restaurant, and Howard hadn't answered it.

"When you leave a job the size-a that paper in Linway to come here and work on one half that big, there's gotta be a reason for it," Deno said.

"That's no sign he's queer," Ketch said. "Hell, he could-a left up there for a dozen different reasons."

"I'll find out about 'im tomorrow," Deno said. "I gotta cousin in Linway's gonna be down here. He'll know."

"You mean the whole family's got a long nose?" Alan said.

"Okay, wise guy," Deno said. "We'll see. I'm sayin' you could strip off a woman in front-a Howard Stirche, and he wouldn't know how to start. He'd be scared to death."

Alan didn't answer. Deno would never quit without the last word anyway. Might as well leave it the way it was. Besides Deno's charge gave Alan an uneasy feeling. Howard had been in Varoo nearly a year, and in that time he had avoided all contact with women, even though Connie Ferris, office girl at the *Herald*, had made her interest in him obvious. And Connie Ferris was easy.

It bothered Alan all the way home and was still on his mind when Clyde arrived from his week on the road. Through supper he was only partly aware of Grace's attempts to draw Clyde into conversation "the way other people talk at the table" and hardly heard Clyde's monosyllabic answers at all. He asked for the car while they were still eating.

"You can have it if you'll drop me off at Walter Sholty's," Clyde said.

"Don't tell me you're going to set up at that filling station all week-end again," Grace said.

"Now take it easy, Mommie," Clyde warned her. "You know what happens when you nag."

Since the week end Lorraine Lindley had been in town he didn't have to say more than that. Grace was instantly silenced, and the meal was ended with no further attempt at table talk.

"You go on to bed, Mommie, whenever you're ready," Clyde said the last thing before Alan and he went out the door. "I might be late."

It was dark when Alan let Clyde off at Walter Sholty's and drove the car on up town. He parked where he could see into Nate Pendleton's and looked for May Tarble. The place was pretty well filled, but he could pick out May with no trouble. She was sitting at her favorite booth beside the juke box, a man across the table from her. Alan went to the big plate glass window and waved his hand to attract May's attention. When he knew she was looking, he motioned for her to come out. May motioned back for him to leave her alone. The man sitting with her turned to see what was

going on, and Alan ducked back out of sight. He got into the car again and sat there watching the top of May's head.

Thirty minutes passed, and the man went into the rest room. Alan moved fast. He got out of the car and went through the front door. He had an errand to do, and he had to be quick about it before Nate or Steve Tibbs saw him. He got to May's table unnoticed. May frowned at him.

"Whatta you want?" she demanded.

There was no time for a build up. Alan had to talk fast before the man came back. "I got the car for that ride we talked about," he said. "Let's go."

May laughed. "Hell, boy, that was two months ago."

"This's the first chance I had." Alan sat down across from her so Nate and Steve would be less likely to notice him.

"When someone lies to me, I'm through," May said.

"I didn't lie to you."

"The hell you didn't. You said we'd go to Bridgeport."

"Well, here I am."

"Yeah. Two months later."

"It hasn't been two months."

"Damned near it."

This could go on all night. Alan moved around the table to sit in the same seat with her. He pressed up close against her and put a hand on her leg. "We had fun, didn't we?" he said.

"You had fun."

She made no attempt to move his hand. He remembered that she had been impressed before by how "clean-looking" he was. Liberally interpreted, that probably meant his youth. He took her hand under the table and placed it on his own leg up close. "Whatta you say?"

"Whatta I say about what?"

"I got the car out in front. Let's go."

"I'm with a guy."

"Get rid of him." He moved her hand across the front of his pants. She made no attempt to avoid the contact.

"I get rid of him, and then maybe you'll be there and maybe you won't," she said.

"I'll be right out in front." Alan saw Steve Tibbs look toward him and then start that way. "Make up your mind. Here comes Steve Tibbs to throw me out."

"Park in the alley," May said. "I'll be there in thirty minutes."

Steve Tibbs came up to the table red faced and angry. "What the hell're you doin' in here?" he demanded.

"Who, me?" Alan said.

"Yes, you! You know better'n to come in here."

"Isn't this the lumber yard?"

"Come on, get the hell outta there before I throw you out," Steve said.

Alan stood up as if highly offended. "I hope someone slugs your juke box," he said and walked out.

He drove around to the alley and parked where he could see Nate's back door. Then he remembered that he would need a bottle of whiskey. He went into Nate's back room and rapped on the door between it and the front. He had to rap several times to attract Steve Tibb's attention above the commotion in the front room. Finally though, Steve stuck his head inquisitively through the doorway. He came on through and slammed the door when he saw Alan.

"If you don't stop screwin' around, I'm gonna beat hell outta you," he said.

"I wanna buy something."

"What?"

"A fifth of Deep River."

"I don't know whether I'll sell it to you or not."

"Why not?"

"What was you doin' up in front a while ago? They'd take Nate's license sure as hell if they knowed it."

"I won't tell if you won't," Alan said. "How about that fifth of Deep River?"

Steve sold him the whiskey, and Alan went back to the

car to wait for May. It was nearly an hour before she appeared. She came through Nate's back door, a little unsteady on her feet, and Alan tapped the horn a couple times to let her know where he was. May got into the car smelling like a wet bar rag.

"You got anyone with you?" she asked.

"Why should I have anyone with me?"

"You did last time."

"Well, not this time." Alan took the cap off the bottle of whiskey and put it to his lips. He pretended to be drinking, but he kept the bottle plugged with his upper lip. Even that contact burned like acid. He passed the bottle to May. "Drink up."

"Hell, I been drinkin' all evening," she said, but she accepted the bottle and took a couple swallows from it. "Where's your wash?"

"What are you, thirsty or dirty?" Alan said.

"You mean you hain't got nothing to wash it down?"

Alan pretended to be a little miffed. "Last time you raised hell because I didn't have any whiskey. This time I got whiskey, and you raise hell because I haven't got anything to wash it down."

"Aw, that's all right, honey." May attempted to pacify him. "I don't care."

"We'll drink to show there's no hard feelings." Alan pretended to take another drink and then passed the bottle to May.

She took a good, long drink and handed the bottle back wheezing and blowing. There were tears in her eyes.

Alan started up the motor.

"Bridgeport, here we come," May said.

"That calls for a drink," Alan said. He pretended to drink and handed the bottle toward May.

"Hain't a damned bit-a use gettin' me drunk," May said. "There's nothin' you can do to me drunk you can't do when I'm sober. Don't you know that, honey?"

Alan pretended to take offense again. "That's a fine way to talk," he said. "I got this bottle of whiskey for you. You said last time you wanted whiskey."

"Okay, honey, okay, I'm sorry," May said. "Gimme your goddam whiskey." She tilted back her head, and the whiskey gurgled as it went down her throat.

Alan started on the road for Bridgeport. Just out of town he stopped and had May to drink again. Two miles later he repeated his invitation. May drank and leaned her head against his shoulder mumbling something about the boy friend she used to have in St. Louis. When Alan turned the car around and headed back for Varoo she didn't know it.

He turned into the alley back of their house and parked behind the garage. Overhead he could see Howard Stirche's light and hear the pecking of his typewriter. He got May from the car and put an arm around her to hold her up. She was unconscious. When he tried to walk with her, she didn't even move her feet. They trailed along behind, and both her shoes came off. Alan laid her on the ground while he retrieved the shoes and put them into his pockets. Then he lifted her bodily and carried her up the steps to Howard Stirche's apartment. May was heavy. Half way up he had to wedge her against the wall and rest for a few seconds. At the top, he kicked on the door, and Howard opened it.

"I'm having a little trouble," Alan told him over May's limp body. "Can you help me?"

"Sure, Alan, come in!" Howard stepped back, and Alan went through. Howard's eyes were wide and excited. "What happened?"

"Can I put her on the bed?" Alan asked.

"Sure," Howard said. "In here."

He led the way into the bedroom, and Alan laid May's unconscious body down. Her hair was hanging over her face in straggly pieces. In the spots that showed through, her face was red. Her big flowered dress was rumped and half

way above her knees. Her stockings had come loose and sagged down around her ankles.

"Were you in an accident?" Howard asked. He was frightened.

"Here're her shoes." Alan took the shoes from his pocket.

Howard had caught a scent of May's breath. He leaned over the bed and sniffed. "She's drunk!"

"Yeah," Alan said. He put the shoes on May's feet.

"How'd she come to get drunk?"

"How'd you think?"

"I got some coffee already made," Howard said. "I'll get some."

He went into the other room and returned a minute later with a cup of hot, black coffee.

Alan helped hold May up, and Howard put the cup to her lips. She swallowed when the coffee was forced into her mouth and fell back on the bed as soon as Alan let loose of her.

Howard straightened up with the empty cup in his hands. "This woman must be thirty-five years old, Alan," he said. "How did you get mixed up with her?"

"I'm not mixed up with her," Alan said.

"I mean how do you happen to be taking care of her? Why did you bring her here?"

Alan watched Howard's face intently. "You said you were lonesome." He permitted his eyes to shift suggestively toward May sprawled on the bed. "And you don't know anyone."

Howard gaped. "Are you suggesting that I . . . that I . . . ?"

"She's not so bad when she's not drunk," Alan said. "And she wouldn't care anyway."

Howard stared. His voice was stunned. "This is ridiculous, Alan. It's disgusting!"

"What's ridiculous about it?" Alan said. "A man *has* to

have a woman. A *real* man does. I thought I was doing you a favor."

"You've got some warped ideas about manhood, Alan." Howard was recovering from his shock. "You need to be set straight about some things. That's why I asked you down at the office to come up here tonight."

"So we could cook pizza and read a book together?" Alan said. "That would-a been cozy, wouldn't it? Real he-man!"

Howard was trying hard to control his temper, not too successfully.

"Your ideas of manhood must have come from toilet walls," he said. "Did you ever stop to think maybe your textbook left some things out?"

"Don't preach to me!" Alan shouted. "I brought her here to find out what kind of man you are. Now I know. You're just what everyone says you are."

"You mean I've been a topic of conversation up at the poolroom?"

"Why not? You been in Varoo a year without coming close to a woman. And without leaving town once. You couldn't even have been on the line over at Bridgeport all this time."

"Alan, Alan!" Howard shook his head. It was a gesture of disparagement. "You've got to be told the facts of life before you do any more of these ridiculous things you been doing all summer."

"Don't bother!" Alan said. "I found out what I came here for. I'll take her and go now." He started to pick May up.

Howard put out a hand to stop him. "I want to talk to you, Alan. It won't take more than a few minutes."

Alan struck the hand down. "Leave me alone. I don't want you to talk to me."

"Alan, this is for your own good. You've got things twisted."

Alan lifted May from the bed. "You gonna open the door for me?"

"No, I'm not," Howard said defiantly. "Not until we've talked a little bit."

"I'll open it myself then," Alan said.

He rested May's unconscious body against the wall and held it there with a knee while he opened the door. He carried her through and left the door open behind him. Howard didn't move from his position at the foot of the bed.

In the car, May stirred once and slipped from the upright position in which Alan had placed her to slump over with a head on his shoulder. Her alcoholic breath filled the car, and she began to snore. He took her home and left her sleeping peacefully on the front porch.

CHAPTER TWELVE

IT WAS another Saturday night at Vic's. The pool players were there, occupying every table. The spectators were in their high backed chairs along the wall. The inexplicable Saturday night atmosphere was as palpable as a new haircut.

Alan was shooting billiards on the front table with Sid Kile when Deno came in. Stanley and Robbie were playing snooker near the back, and there was a pea pool game going on a middle table. Vic hurried from one table to another, rack in hand, his Saturday night starched, white

shirt collar underscoring the Saturday night excitement on his face.

"Well, I found out about your old buddy," Deno said to Alan as soon as he saw him.

"What old buddy?" Alan asked.

"Stirche," Deno said. "You oughtta know. You was tryin' to get a date for 'im."

"He's no buddy of mine," Alan said.

Deno smirked. I wouldn't blame you for not claimin' 'im. My cousin from Linway knows all about Howard Stirche. I found out just what he is."

"What is he?" Alan knew what was coming, but he asked anyway.

"He's a queer! Just like I said."

Alan felt a nerve twitch. "You're a liar!" he said deliberately.

"Well, the hell he's not!" Deno declared. "My cousin knows all about 'im. It was all over Linway. He *had* to leave."

"What's that, Deno?" Chris Herrendon asked eagerly. "That guy down at the newspaper office's a queer?"

"Hell, yes!" Deno said. "My cousin was down from Linway today. He knowed Stirche up there. He's queer as a three-dollar bill!"

"I wouldn't doubt it," Chris said. "I never did think he acts right."

"What'd he do in Linway that's queer?" Tod Lofts asked.

"Same thing he does here." Deno enjoyed being the center of attention. "Went for a year without touchin' a woman; lived in a little two-bit room all by hisself, like a hermit. Just the way he does here exactly."

"Did they ever catch him makin' a pass at someone?" Chris Herrendon asked.

"How the hell you gonna catch a bastard like that makin' a pass at anyone?" Deno demanded. "But you know damned well he does it. Everyone's gotta get his kicks someway. My

cousin says every man and boy in town was scared to death to get within a block of that damned newspaper office up there."

"You're a goddam liar, and so's your cousin!" Alan shouted at Deno. And then, almost as if it were in a dream, and entirely without effort, he lunged at Deno and struck him in the mouth. The jar against his fist and the splatting sound it made against Deno's face dispelled the dream, and Alan was aware that his body was trembling.

Deno staggered backward into the row of spectators sitting in chairs along the wall. They swore and put their hands up to keep him from crashing into them. Deno's course was deflected, and he fell flat on the floor at their feet.

Alan was on him in an instant. Twice he kicked viciously into the fallen Deno's ribs and then moved up toward Deno's face. He kicked again, but Deno moved, and the kick intended for his face struck a shoulder and ripped open the seam of his shirt.

Deno rolled to get away, but the roll brought him up short against the feet of those sitting in chairs. The move turned Deno's back, and Alan aimed a kick at the back of his head. But Deno, seeing that his movement away from Alan was blocked, had reversed directions and was rolling directly toward Alan just as he drew back one leg to kick. Deno's rolling body struck the supporting leg, and Alan fell. Both boys lay full-length on the floor. Deno, slightly dazed, lay with his face upturned. Alan straddled him and pinioned both his arms with a knee on each side. He grasped Deno's hair, lifted his head off the floor, and banged it down again.

"Stop that crazy fool!" Vic shouted from the back.

But nothing moved around the fighters except a curtain of tobacco smoke. The primitive emotion to kill that had suddenly been unleashed among them held spectators motionless as staring window mannikins.

"He'll kill Deno banging his head that way!" Vic shouted.

Ketch Martin got there first. He grabbed Alan's hands

and tried to untangle them from Deno's hair. But Alan held fast. Vic knelt to help Ketch. Together they unclenched Alan's fingers and dragged him to his feet. Even when he stood, Alan continued to fight. He kicked Deno twice before Vic and Ketch could drag him aside.

Tod Lofts and Chris Herrendon helped Deno stand up.

"You okay, Deno?" Tod asked.

"Yeah—I'll be okay—in a minute!" Deno panted. He breathed deeply, hands on hips, while his head cleared.

Then, suddenly, before anyone could prevent it, he threw himself at Alan. Twice he struck, his fist smashing squarely on Alan's chin, and each time Alan and the two men holding him were staggered.

"Get him out of here!" Vic shouted.

Three men grabbed Deno and drew him back out of range. And there they stood: Deno, his shirt torn, his hair sticking out like potted foliage that has outgrown its container, swearing and struggling to get at Alan; and Alan, hating Deno with a fervor that had been feeding inside him for weeks, hating him for the crude, despicable bully he had always been and for the thing he said about Howard Stirche.

"You damned fools quit it now!" Vic shouted, still holding onto Alan. "You hear me? I'll never let either one of you come inside this place again!"

"Let 'em fight it out!" Cliff Maddox said eagerly. "You might as well."

"I'm not lettin' 'em kill each other in here!" Vic said.

"Take 'em back to the alley and turn 'em loose," Cliff said. "Let 'em get it outta their system."

"Let us go back to the alley!" Deno implored, lunging against the arms that restrained him.

"We might as well, Vic!" Ketch said. "They'll have to fight it out sometime. It might as well be now while we can watch."

Alan threw himself at Deno, at the same time kicking backward into Vic's shin.

Vic let out a howl. "Take 'em out of here then!" he bel-lowed. "Get 'em all the way out!" He released his grip on Alan's arm, and someone else took hold.

"Come on," Ketch said to Alan, "you wanted to fight so bad, now you're gonna get a chance."

His captors started toward the back, and Alan walked along between them.

"Bring Deno," Ketch shouted over his shoulder.

The men holding Deno led him along, and behind the little group came everyone in the poolroom, anticipation as unbecomingly obvious on their faces as a too young girl's first lipstick.

In the alley, the little group made up of Alan and his captors stood facing Deno and his captors a few feet away. Everyone else stood in a ring on all sides.

"You ready?" Ketch called to the men who held Deno.

"Yeah," they said.

"Okay," Ketch said. "When I count three, we'll turn 'em both loose at the same time."

"They'll bust hell outta theirselves here on these bricks," someone in the crowd said.

"By-god, they wanted to fight!" Ketch said. "This's good-a place as any."

He counted slowly, and on the third count Alan felt the hands holding him let loose. At the same time, Deno came toward him stepping warily. Alan went to meet him until they stood about six feet apart. Abruptly, Alan lowered his head and charged. His head struck Deno in the breast, but not before Deno had time to throw an arm around Alan's neck. Both boys went down on the rough bricks of the alley. Deno fell backward, and Alan forward on top of him.

But Deno had retained his hold on Alan's neck, clamping it between his right arm and the side of his body. The position thrust Alan's head out past Deno's back so that

Alan's face would be first to come into contact with the bricks. Even as they fell, Alan realized his danger. He jerked to free himself, but Deno's hold did not loosen. Alan couldn't even turn his head sideways. He pressed his lips tight to protect the jar as his face struck into the bricks with all the weight of Deno's body and his own behind it. It was like being sprayed with ground glass. His entire face flamed in an instant, and he felt blood running over it as if someone had doused him with hot water.

Then a dizziness dispelled the sensation, and he felt nothing. His ears rang, and the muted noises of the crowd sounded like a far-off chirping of crickets. He was aware of Deno's shove rolling him over on his back, but he was unable to resist it. He felt a weight on his chest and forced his eyes open. Deno's head was dangling somewhere in the air over him.

Then he felt a blow on his chin, and he knew Deno was hitting him. Twice more Deno struck, but the blows didn't hurt. It was as if Deno's fists were sponges. And each time a sponge landed, it squeezed out a horrible black ink that tried to run into Alan's eyes and drown him. It took all his effort to hold his eyes open.

The fourth time Deno drew back his fist, Ketch grabbed it. "Let 'im be, Deno," he said. "You'll kill 'im."

"I ain't hit 'im good yet!" Deno panted.

"He run his face into the bricks when you fell," Ketch said. "Come on, get off-a 'im. He's out." Ketch drew Deno to his feet.

Deno stood looking down at Alan for several seconds, panting deeply to get his breathing regulated. "His eyes's open," he said.

Alan tried to make a leg go out and trip Deno, but the leg wouldn't move.

"He's not clear out," Ketch said, "but you could easy kill 'im when he's like this. You better leave 'im alone now." He started to lead Deno away.

Deno drew back. "No, wait a minute," he protested. "I

won't hit 'im any more, but I wantta tell the sonofabitch something. Soon as he can hear me all right."

Ketch released his hold, and Deno began to brush the dust from his clothes. The crowd stood tensely looking from Deno back to Alan's still figure as if awaiting something more. Stanley knelt beside Alan and lifted his head.

"I'll help you home, Al," he said.

Robbie knelt at Alan's head and pressed his not too clean handkerchief against a cut on his face. "I will too, Al," he said.

Deno leaned over Alan's prostrate form. "Can you hear me, Big Shot?" he demanded. Victory had charged him with a smugness that amounted almost to good humor.

"Yeah," Alan managed to say.

"Then I'm gonna say again what I said inside," Deno declared. "Your old buddy's a queer! And I'm gonna tell you something else. The way you're takin' his part all the time, I wouldn't be surprised if you're one too!" He turned abruptly away and started toward Vic's back door. Ketch walked beside him. The crowd fell back.

"You sonofabitch!" Alan intended to shout at Deno, but his voice was little more than a croak. He struggled to rise, and Stanley helped him to stand up.

"What you doing, Al?" Stanley said. "You better take it easy."

Alan shook off Stanley's hands and ran at Deno. It was a tremendous effort, leaving barely enough strength over to strike Deno in the middle of the back. It was a puny, little blow that took the last ounce of Alan's strength and left him bent over at the waist gasping for breath.

The attack had been so unexpected that it was over before anyone actually realized what was going on. The crowd, which had been buzzing with talk, was hypnotically silenced. Deno turned in surprise at the slight blow on his back. The anger came back into his face.

"Hain't you had enough yet?" he screamed at Alan.

Alan still stood bent over at the waist, breathing deeply. He saw Deno's fist flashing toward him, but he was powerless to move out of the way. All the defense he could manage was to lower his head. The blow struck his forehead, and he went straight backward on the bricks. He struggled to rise but was unable to get farther than one elbow. Deno was coming toward him again. Alan clenched his teeth. And then suddenly a pair of thin, skinny legs came between Alan's vision and Deno. It was Robbie, who had placed himself squarely in Deno's path.

"Let 'im alone, Deno, goddam you!" Robbie shouted, but he made no move to attack. Both hands were at his sides.

Deno's fist shot out squarely into Robbie's face, and Robbie fell flat. He raised himself to a sitting position so quickly it looked comical. Blood was dribbling from his nose, and he was crying.

"I'll kill you for that, Deno!" His voice was insanely shrill and out of control.

The few seconds of Robbie's interference, fleeting as it had been, made obvious that any further attack against Alan was unnecessary. He lay propped on one elbow, squirming helplessly to rise. Deno turned all his fury upon Robbie.

"What'd you get in my way for?" he demanded. "You wantta take his part, come on! I'll tromp hell outta you too while I'm at it!"

"I'll kill you!" Robbie was sobbing in great gasps that threatened to choke him.

He stood up, and Deno hunched his shoulders in preparation for the attack. But Robbie turned, running in the other direction.

"I thought you was gonna kill me!" Deno shouted after him. "You're goin' the wrong way!" He laughed in wild enjoyment of his complete charge over the field of battle.

Only Robbie's sobbing came back over the sound of his slapping shoes as he ran down the alley. The tension was

broken, and there was an amplification of Deno's laugh from the crowd.

Ketch grabbed one of Deno's arms and lifted it overhead in exuberant horseplay. "I now pronounce you man and wife!" Ketch declared. Then he laughed and pretended he had made a mistake. "No! No, that's not right, is it? I mean, I now pronounce you champ! Champ of the alley! Come on, chump . . . I mean *champ!* I'll buy you a drink."

The two disappeared up the alley toward Nate's back door and the crowd broke up. Only a few of the more curious remained behind to stare at Alan. Stanley and Sid Kile helped Alan stand up.

"What'd you go after him the second time for?" Stanley demanded. "You might-a known you couldn't do anything then."

Alan gulped air through his mouth because it hurt to breathe through his nose. He tried to stand up straight, but when Stanley and Sid let loose, he nearly fell.

"We better take 'im into Vic's and wash the blood off," Sid said.

At the sink where he had performed the same service for Robbie, Stanley washed the blood from Alan's face while Sid Kile held him up.

"That's about the best I can do, Al," Stanley said when he was finished. "It looks a little better."

Alan gripped the side of the sink to hold himself up and looked into the mirror. His face was a welter of scratches and cuts. They didn't look deep, but they gave his face a raw, meaty appearance. His lower lip was split. A puffy, purple discoloration swollen across the bridge of his nose was so large he could see it even without aid of the mirror. He laid a finger lightly on his nose, and the pain nearly made him yell. He tried breathing through it, and the passage of air made it hurt worse. He resumed breathing through his mouth.

"I think your nose's broke," Sid Kile said.

"It'll be okay," Alan said weakly.

"Does it hurt?" Stanley asked.

"Not unless I breathe through it," Alan said. He let loose of the sink and found that he could stand without it. He started for the door. Every time he moved his right leg, he was aware of a pain in his hip.

"Where you going?" Stanley asked.

"Home."

"You want me to go with you?"

Alan turned quickly, as quickly as his condition would permit. "No!" he almost shouted.

Stanley was taken aback at the force of Alan's negation. "Okay!" he said peevishly. "I just thought you might need some help."

"I don't need any help!" Alan declared. He pushed open the door and went out.

Grace was sitting on the front porch when Alan turned in off the sidewalk. She ran to meet him.

"Alan! What's the matter?" she cried. She looked from his torn, bleeding face to his bloody shirt. Her eyes were big and frightened.

"Nothing," Alan said without slacking his pace. He went past her toward the back of the house.

"Nothing?" She followed after him. "What happened to you?" Her voice was frantic.

"I fell down." Alan kept walking. He passed the back porch.

"Where're you going?" Grace shouted after him.

He looked up at a lighted window over the garage. Through it came the sound of a typewriter.

"Alan, what's the matter with you?"

Alan didn't answer. He was at the bottom of the stairway now.

"Alan, I'm going to phone Walter Sholty's and have your

father come home!" she called wildly. "You tell me what happened to you!"

Alan started up the steps, and Grace turned quickly away, running.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ALAN entered without knocking. Howard was sitting at the table, typing, his back to the door. He turned, frowning at the intrusion. But his irritation quickly changed to a look of shock when he saw Alan's mangled face. He rose.

"Alan! What happened to you?"

Alan went to the middle of the floor, and Howard came toward him.

"What happened to your face?" He reached out to touch it.

Alan jerked back. "Don't touch me!"

Howard's face flushed as if with embarrassment, and his hand dropped.

"How come you left Linway to come here?" Alan had to know. It was important.

Howard's eyes hardened in a defensive glare. "What business is it of yours?" he said.

"Because that's what's wrong with my face," Alan said.

"I told you that day in the alley not to be fighting for me," Howard said. "I can take care of myself."

"You wantta know what they said about you?" Alan demanded.

"Who?"

"Jack Deno!"

"I don't care what Jack Deno says about me."

"He says you're a queer!" Alan hurled the charge viciously. It had been rankling inside him for a long time.

Howard laughed. It was a single derisive note. "Does he?" He sat sideways in the straight chair in front of his typewriter.

Alan blinked. "Don't you care because he's telling everyone you're queer? And you left Linway because you *had* to?"

"Does it matter what a yokel like Jack Deno tells everyone?" Howard said.

Alan clenched his fists to keep from hitting the man. "That's what you always say! Doesn't *anything* matter to you?"

"I suppose some things matter," Howard said slowly.

"But you never *saw* anything that mattered enough to fight! Is that it?" Alan was contemptuous.

Howard lifted his eyes to look directly into Alan's. "What *you* think about me matters, Alan," he said.

Alan's face burned. "Then tell me why you left Linway," he said harshly.

"What's the difference?" Howard said. "You made up your mind about me last night, didn't you?"

"You gonna tell me?"

Howard seemed to be considering. He looked out the window for a long time. Then apparently his mind was made up. "I guess I'll tell you Alan. There's no one else in town I'd bother to tell because there's no one else would understand."

Alan sneered. "Just tell me, will you? You can save the snow job."

"No one made me leave Linway." Howard spoke slowly but with rising intensity as he went along. "I left because I didn't want to stay any longer. I was engaged to a girl there, and she got pneumonia. She died. After that I kind-a went to pieces, I guess. I didn't want anyone around me, and I didn't care what anyone thought about me. And I guess I kind-a

got a reputation as an oddball. I knew what they were saying about me. But it didn't matter."

He looked up apologetically. "There's that word again." Alan couldn't meet his look.

Howard went on. "Anyway when I got the idea for the novel, I knew I couldn't ever write it in Linway. And there wasn't anything to hold me there any longer. So I came here. I've known all the time what they were saying about me up at the poolroom. But I was glad I came anyhow—for two reasons: because I found I could write here; and the writing helped to clear out a lot of things I needed to have cleared out. That's one reason."

Howard hesitated. "And the other one is you, Alan."

Alan felt his cheeks burn. "What's special about me?"

"You were one person I could talk to. The only one I've found in over two years. It helped a lot."

"How come you kept inviting me up here all the time?" Alan demanded.

"I was lonesome, that's all."

"Yeah, I'll *bet* that's all!"

"Why do *you* think?"

"Because you're a queer! Just like Deno says!" Alan's voice had become loud. "And you think I'm one too!"

Howard's calm voice was a quiet contrast to Alan's shouting. "And what do you think about it?" he asked.

Alan wasn't expecting the question. He swallowed. "What do I think about what?"

"About yourself!"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Alan wasn't shouting now. He knew he was staring crazily. He couldn't make himself look away from Howard's face.

"Don't you?" Howard said.

"No!"

"Don't you think it's about time we had that little talk, Alan?"

"What is there to talk about?"

"Let's start with when you let the train run over you."

"They dared me to do it, and I did it!" Alan knew that his voice was not convincing. He drummed up a show of defiance. He had to. "So what? Why else would I do it?"

"So everyone would think what a man you are," Howard said softly.

Alan's lips felt dry. He wetted them. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

"That would keep them from thinking about you what you think about yourself," Howard said.

Alan had to go all the way. There was a horrible fascination about it like the attraction a drunk feels for the drink he knows will make him sick. "What do I think about myself?" he said hoarsely.

"You don't have to pretend any longer, Alan," Howard said. "I'm not one of the boys down at the poolroom." The quiet way he said it was like closing a book. Or shutting a door.

"How long have you known?" Alan said. He was tired. His nose hurt.

"I've known for a long time," Howard said. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

Alan sat on the edge of the sofa. "Can you tell I'm one by just *looking*?"

"Stop it, Alan!" Howard cried. He stood up. "You're not homosexual! Stop thinking you are!" He crossed to the sofa.

Alan looked up fiercely. "Stay away from me!" he warned. "I'll beat your head in if you so much as touch me!"

Howard backed away hastily. "You've got it all wrong, Alan," he said. "You don't have anything to be scared of. You're *all right*!"

Alan sneered. "Sure, I'm all right! There's nothing wrong with *me*!"

"Look at me, Alan!" Howard kept his distance.

Alan looked at him.

"Is it because of an attraction you feel for me? Is that

why you think you're homosexual? Because if it is, you're off the track! There's nothing wrong with the way you feel!"

Alan was close to tears. His nerves were taut. "Nothing wrong with wanting to be up here with you all the time?" he shouted. "Nothing wrong with standing around on the sidewalks outside the hotel hoping I'd bump into you? Laying awake nights thinking about you? That's normal, is it?"

"Look, Alan!" Howard was pleading now. The earnestness in his voice made his face red. The redness even invaded his eyes. "You liked to be with me because we could talk about things you couldn't talk about with anyone else. We were interested in the same things. We were two guys alike. In this whole town there wasn't anyone else like us."

"You can say that again!" Alan said.

"It had nothing to do with sex, Alan!"

"Whatta you think I am? Crazy or something?" Alan's body trembled as if the room were cold. His chin quivered. "You don't think you're the first one, do you? I been queer since I was thirteen years old!"

"You don't know what queer is!" Howard said.

"You think not?" Alan rose and came close to Howard with fists clenched. "There used to be a preacher down at the church. We got together all the time! Sometimes a couple nights a week!"

Howard blinked, and Alan pressed his point fiercely. "Whatta you think of that?"

"You were just a kid, Alan! He took advantage of you."

"Took advantage of me?" Alan laughed. "I *enjoyed* it! When he didn't send for me, I'd go looking him up!"

"And that proves you're not normal, does it?" Howard said calmly.

Alan stared. He had revealed the clincher, and Howard pretended not to be convinced. "Whatta you angling for?" he said. "If I thought you were another Brother Phillcrest, I'd kill you right here!"

"You don't have to worry about me, Alan," Howard said. "Or yourself either. There's nothing wrong with you."

Alan couldn't tell whether Howard was making fun of him or not. "I'm a queer!" he screamed into Howard's face. "You wantta know what everyone says about guys like me?"

"I know what they say at the poolroom, Alan. But that's not everyone."

"You don't know what they say! You've never been inside the place!"

"Every town has a poolroom," Howard said.

Alan had to hit something. He crossed the room and struck the door as hard as he could. A sharp pain shot up to his elbow. He could even feel it in his broken nose. It felt good. He looked down at his fist. The knuckles had disappeared. There were only bloody round spots where they had been.

The door burst open, and Clyde strode into the room, followed by Grace. Alan gaped foolishly from his bruised hand to his father's angry face.

"What the hell's goin' on here?" Clyde demanded.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

HIS FATHER'S look made Alan feel unaccountably guilty of something. He remembered the time he was twelve years old, and Grace had found a pornographic booklet in his pocket one washday.

"What's this all about?" Clyde demanded again of Alan.

Grace was peering at him with frightened eyes over Clyde's shoulder. Alan couldn't think of anything to say.

Howard cleared his throat. "Alan's been fighting," he said.

Clyde turned his hostile look from Alan to Howard. "What about?"

"I . . . I guess it was something they said up at the pool-room," Howard said. "Something about me."

"What was it?"

"I told Alan he didn't need to take my part," Howard said. "I told him I could take my own part."

Clyde turned back to Alan. "What'd you fight about, Alan?" he demanded sternly. He waited for an answer, but Alan looked down at his bruised hand and remained silent. "Do you hear me, Alan?" Clyde shouted.

"Alan's confused," Howard spoke up nervously. "I've been trying to set him straight about some things."

"What things?"

"Well . . . he . . . had some mistaken ideas about himself. There were some things he wasn't sure of."

"What kind-a things?" Clyde's angry manner was being replaced by one of suspicion.

Howard's discomfiture showed in his tense, strained face. "It was a sex problem. He thought some of his feelings might not be natural."

"Whatta you mean, natural?"

"Uhhh . . . manly."

Clyde looked blank for a few seconds. Then suddenly he understood. "Are you trying to tell me Alan's a queer?" Clyde's eyes popped. He looked at Alan as if to convince himself that they were actually talking about his son.

"His feelings were completely normal," Howard explained hastily, "but Alan wasn't sure."

"Everyone knows what a queer is!" Clyde declared. "If he don't, I'll damned quick tell 'im!"

"I explained it to him," Howard said.

Clyde turned back to Alan. "Why didn't you come to me?" he demanded. "*I'm your father.*"

"I don't know!" Alan cried. "I'm all mixed up!"

"What the hell is there to be mixed up about? You're either queer or else you're not! What about these feelings you had? What kind-a feelings?"

Alan looked mutely down at his hands.

"Goddammit, Alan! If you don't talk to me, I'll whale the hell outta you!"

Howard reluctantly took up the explanation again. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the palms of his hands. He ran his fingers through his hair. "Alan has had a . . . an unpleasant experience," he said haltingly. "And it . . . it left him with certain doubts . . . about himself."

Clyde was dumfounded. He swung back on Alan. "Alan, by-god, I'm gonna ask you a question, and I want an answer! Have you and some other boy been foolin' around with each other someway?"

The revulsion in Clyde's voice burned against Alan's face like a hot wind. "No, we haven't!" he shouted.

Clyde looked to Howard for confirmation. "Is he mixed up with some other boy or not?" he demanded.

"This . . . this whole thing occurred some years ago," Howard explained.

"I don't give a goddam when it occurred! I wantta know what happened!"

"Well . . . it wasn't another boy. There was a man involved."

Clyde recoiled as if he had been struck. "Who?" he gasped. "Who is the sonofabitch?"

Clyde was looking to Howard for an answer. Howard appealed to Alan. "You better tell your father about it, Alan."

"You tell him if you want him told!" Alan shouted the words. "You started it!"

Clyde's attention came back to Howard fiercely. "Who was it?"

Howard's agony was painful to see. "The way Alan tells me," he said, "there was someone down at the church. A minister. When Alan was only thirteen years old."

Clyde was shocked but only for an instant. He turned triumphantly to Grace. "There's your goddammed preachers for you!"

Grace was whitefaced and shaking.

Clyde was pouncing on the next thing. "When Alan was thirteen! Who would that have been?"

Grace was remembering back. "Brother Phillcrest!"

Clyde ground a fist into open palm. "That sonofabitch!" He turned to Alan. "What was the matter with you? You was thirteen! That's big enough to know what he was doing. Why didn't you hit him in the goddam mouth?"

"Ask *him!*" Alan jerked his head to indicate Howard. "He's the one that's got all the answers!"

"I'm askin' *you!*" Clyde shouted back at him. "Why didn't you knock the sonofabitch on his ass?"

Alan's answer came with all the pent up force of months of frustration and inner goading. "Because I *liked* what he was doing to me!" It was the breaking point. He sobbed. He put his arms against the wall and hid his face against them.

Clyde was staring at him in horror. "*My* son a queer?" He seemed to be questioning the validity of his senses.

"I don't think there's anything unnatural about Alan's reaction," Howard said. "He was thirteen years old. The man took advantage of him, and Alan was probably too scared to tell anybody."

Clyde turned like a stricken fighter who labors to regain his second wind. "Is that the kind-a crap you been tellin' him? That what he done was all right?"

"The sex pattern isn't clear when a boy's thirteen," Howard said. "Lots of boys have had experiences like Alan's and got over it. It's a phase they go through."

"You're forgettin' something, hain't you?"

"What?"

"Alan hain't thirteen any longer."

"Alan's sensitive. It takes time for a boy like that to find himself."

"Especially when there's someone around tellin' him there's nothin' wrong with what he done!"

Howard winced. "I didn't tell him it wasn't wrong. I told him that his reactions were normal for a thirteen-year-old boy."

"And I say they're not!" Clyde's anger was mounting again. "I say they're not, and I'm his father!"

"All right, then, they're not!" Howard's anger was rising too. "Alan came to me with an emotional problem, and I tried to help him!"

"Tried to help him, hell!" Clyde was shouting again. "You give him a bunch-a queer talk! You wantta know what everyone in this town says about you?"

"I don't care what everyone in this town says about me!"

"They say you're queer!"

Howard's head came up, and for the first time his eyes met Clyde's in a head-on stare. There was no apology in his manner. His extreme nervousness had disappeared. His eyes were the horrible pits of scalding color they had been the afternoon he stood with open bladed knife facing Deno in the alley.

"So?"

"So it's funny to me that Alan would come to you with this thing instead of me. *I'm* his father!"

"Then why don't you act like one? Instead of a middle-aged high school boy that still considers sex as a substitute for being on the basketball team!"

Clyde's face went livid. "When's his time up?" he demanded obliquely of Grace.

Grace had been looking on wordlessly, each thing said causing her eyes to alternate with concern for Clyde and an

awed kind of revulsion for Howard. "Two weeks," she said huskily, as if the words were sticky and had to be broken loose from the lining of her throat.

Clyde took a wallet from his pocket and extracted some money. "Here's thirty dollars!" He held the bills out toward Howard. "Take it and get out! If I ever see you again, I'll have you arrested for what you tried to do to my son!"

Howard snatched the bills from Clyde's hand and turned away. "What I leave behind now, I'll pick up tomorrow," he said. He went through the doorway into the bedroom.

Alan crossed after him.

"Stay out of there!" Clyde ordered harshly, but Alan went in.

Howard was stuffing things into a suitcase.

"Where you going?" Alan asked.

Howard didn't look up. "I'll stay at the hotel," he said. "Tomorrow I'll leave town."

"Take me with you!"

"Alan!" Clyde had entered the bedroom. "You go to the house!" He took Alan's shoulders and turned him roughly toward the door.

Alan struck his father's hands down and gave him a shove. Clyde stumbled backward and would have fallen, but he grabbed the wall and stood in the doorway holding to it. Grace looked over his shoulder. Alan turned his back to them.

"I wantta go with you!" he said to Howard.

"You *can't* go with me!" Howard said. "What's the matter with you?"

"Why *can't* I? You said it was all right the way I feel! It's *all right*, isn't it?"

"Of course, it's all right!" Howard said. "You didn't do anything that nine boys out of ten wouldn't have done."

"I mean it's all right about *us*! You and me!"

"Certainly it's all right about us! Don't you think two men can have an affection for each other without its being based on sex?"

"Then take me with you!"

"I can't take you with me!"

"Why not?"

"Because there's more to it than just you and me! There's the rest of the world too!"

"I don't care anything about the rest of the world!"

"You *have* to care! Whether you want to or not!"

"*Why* do I?"

"Because you're part of it! And they'll hate you if you're different!"

"Even when I'm not doing anything wrong?"

"Oh, stop it, Alan! Grow up!" Howard was angry again. "You don't think I know the answers to everything, do you? I'm still looking myself. Everyone is. All I'm trying to tell you is that you're normal. You're as normal as anyone else."

"You're a liar!" Alan shouted as loudly as he could shout. "You been lying all the time! I'm a queer! That's why you don't wantta take me with you! You don't want anything to do with me!"

Howard took both Alan's shoulders and shook him to still the hysterical outburst. "You're no different from the majority of others, Alan!" he shouted. "You've got to believe that. If you ever want to have a minute's peace of mind for the rest of your life, you've *got* to believe it!"

Alan felt tears running down his face from the shaking. "I *don't* believe it!" He threw himself forward onto the bed, sobbing. He thrust his face flat down against the spread, and the contact made his broken nose hurt. He rolled his head from side to side because the pain felt good.

Howard went out without looking back, Clyde and Grace standing wordlessly aside to let him through the doorway. When the outside door had closed behind him, Clyde went to the bed and took Alan roughly by one hand.

"Stop bawlin' like a girl!" he ordered. He pulled Alan up from the bed. "Go to the house!"

Alan came to his feet and tried to jerk away from Clyde's

hold. But Clyde held fast with one hand and slapped Alan's face with the other. It was an open-handed, stinging blow.

"Don't ever think you're too big for me to handle!" Clyde warned angrily.

Alan struck with his fist. It landed squarely on Clyde's chin, and he went staggering backward to land in a chair like an awkward lump deposited there by the wind. He made no effort to rise or even to shift his position. He stared at Alan in disbelief and surprise, but there was no softness in him, no understanding. Grace crossed the room and stood behind Clyde's chair as if for protection.

Alan stared at them in horror. And they stared back. There was no word spoken. There was only the sound of Clyde's breathing.

Abruptly Alan turned and ran from the room. He fled from the apartment and down the steps.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THERE WAS no purpose in the direction Alan took. He ran blindly, without conscious sense of going any place. It wasn't until he leaned, panting and still half-sobbing against the rough bricks of the wall framing Vic's back door, that he was aware of his surroundings.

There was the forlorn-looking street light sending forth illumination into a wicked world with all the apathy of a tired old mother. There was the faraway sound of Saturday night merriment coming from Vic's front room, muffled and secret, as if joy were a thing to be bootlegged.

Sid Kile came up the alley. He looked curiously at Alan and paused. "Hi, Al," he said.

Alan looked down. He didn't want Sid Kile to see the tears in his eyes.

"Your nose's swelled worse," Sid said. "You better do something about it. It might be broke."

Alan kept his eyes on the ground.

Sid turned in toward Vic's back door. "You comin' in?"

"Pretty soon," Alan told him.

Sid went in.

Alan took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped at his eyes, carefully avoiding contact with his nose. Whatever happened to guys like him? Freaks. Would it be worse as he got older?

He looked down at his hands holding the handkerchief. They were long, slim hands—delicate and sensitive looking—like a girl's! He had never noticed before that his hands were like a girl's. He let the handkerchief fall and put his hands behind him out of sight between his body and the brick wall. Then suddenly Jack Deno's words sounded in his ears, the words Jack Deno had spoken earlier that night as he bent over Alan's helpless body there in the alley: "*Your old buddy's a queer. And I'm going to tell you something else. . . . I wouldn't be surprised if you're one too!*" Brother Phillcrest's face leered from the darkness. Alan sobbed and covered his eyes with his hands, hating even the comforting touch of them.

He was standing that way when Stanley and Robbie came out the back door.

"Sid Kile said you was back here," Robbie said.

"What's the matter?" Stanley asked, staring curiously.

Alan took his hands down from his face. "Nothing," he said.

"I thought you went home."

It wasn't a question and didn't require an answer. Alan didn't make any.

"You're not the only one he hit in the face," Robbie said sympathetically. "My nose bled for half an hour. But I'm layin' for 'im. He'll be comin' into Vic's pretty soon."

"Rob's got his gun again," Stanley said. "He says he's gonna kill Deno this time."

"I am too!" Robbie reached inside his shirt and brought out the revolver as proof of his declaration.

"Let's see it." Alan held out his hand, and Robbie put the gun into it. It was warm with heat from Robbie's body. It had a friendly feel. Alan spun the cylinder and watched it go around.

"It's your fault you got the hell beat out of you like you did," Stanley told Alan. "Deno was ready to quit if you'd just let him do it. You're lucky he didn't kill you."

The absurdity of the statement almost made Alan laugh. "Yeah, I'm lucky!" he said. "I'm real lucky! I oughta take up gambling for my life's work!" He looked down at the gun in his hands and lifted it with a sudden impulse. "I think I will!" He gave the cylinder a spin, put the gun to his temple, and pulled the trigger. There was a sharp click that made his ear tickle on the inside.

Robbie gaped foolishly.

Stanley turned white. "That's got a shell in it, Al!" he said, shaken at this sudden, stunning evidence of the nearness, the capriciousness of death.

"Sure!" Alan declared. "I'm such a lucky sonofabitch I've taken up gambling! This's Russian roulett!" He gave the cylinder another spin, returned the gun to his temple, and pulled the trigger again. Another click!

Robbie continued to gape, unable immediately to comprehend the thing he saw. Stanley was horrified. The thing he had mistaken for death's nearness was really tardiness. He moved forward.

"Give me that gun, Al!" he said.

Alan backed away. "Whatta you want with it?" he said. "You might hurt yourself."

"You tried to kill yourself." Stanley sounded awed.

"I'm not gonna kill myself." Alan's voice was mocking. "I'm just playing Russian roulette. I can play roulette as well as a goddam Russian, can't I?"

"Help me get that gun, Rob," Stanley said.

"You mean take it away from 'im?" Robbie was frightened.

"Yeah. We can get it." Stanley took a couple steps toward Alan.

"Someone might get hurt!" Robbie said uncertainly.

"I don't think there's any doubt of that," Alan said, and pointed the gun at the other two.

Stanley back up hastily. "What's the matter with you, Al?" he demanded. "Are you crazy?"

"Just don't bother me," Alan said. "I don't wantta be bothered." He leaned up against Vic's wall and crossed his arms on his chest so the gun's muzzle stuck up above his left shoulder.

Abruptly Stanley whirled and went through Vic's back doorway.

"Where you goin', Stan?" Robbie called.

"You stay out here with him," Stanley said just before he disappeared.

Robbie faced Alan like a small boy left in the parlor to entertain grown up company. "My dad'll raise hell when he finds out you had his gun," he said peevishly.

"Don't tell him," Alan said.

"What if he finds out?"

"Lie about it." Alan didn't usually tease Robbie the way everyone else did. But right now it was fun. It brought the same kind of satisfaction he had felt from rolling his face on the bed spread and feeling the pain.

"He'll whomp the hell outta me," Robbie said.

"Don't let him do it."

"How'm I gonna stop 'im?"

"Tell him please don't."

"Please don't?"

"Yeah, that'll stop him."

Robbie looked at him with hurt eyes. "You think I'm a half-wit too, don't you?" he said.

"I think if you are and that's all that's wrong with you, you're lucky," Alan said bitterly. "Look at me."

"What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing a hole in the head wouldn't fix."

There was a sudden eruption of excited men and boys following Stanley through Vic's back doorway. They formed a semi-circle in the alley about thirty feet from Alan, staring at him with a kind of fascination. The street light was just bright enough to highlight their features, leaving shadows where cheeks and eyes should have been, and splashing out hollow faces that might have been deaths' heads except for the lively excitement they generated. The excitement leaped the space between them and Alan and made his body stiffen. He stood straighter and pressed his shoulders more firmly against Vic's friendly brick wall.

"What you doin' with that gun, Al?" Vic demanded.

"What business is it of yours?" Alan said. "Go sweep your poolroom!"

Ketch Martin took up the interrogation. "What you wantta do?" he said. "Hurt someone?"

"I just wantta be left alone," Alan said.

"Come on, give me that gun." Ketch started slowly toward Alan.

"Come get it!" Alan pointed the gun at Ketch.

Ketch backed up into the crowd again. "You sure that gun's loaded?" he asked Stanley.

"It's got one shell in it," Stanley said.

"Someone better go get Clyde," Vic said.

Several volunteered.

"Tell 'im to get up here fast," Vic said.

Harry Steen, night policeman, came down the alley. "What's goin' on here?" he demanded, shoving his way through the crowd to the front of the semi-circle.

"Al Peerman's got a gun!" someone said.

"He's been tryin' to kill hisself!"

"He tried to kill Ketch Martin too!"

"He didn't try to kill Ketch Martin!"

"The hell he didn't! He pointed the gun at 'im!"

"He's been playing Russian roulette," Stanley told Harry Steen.

"What's Russian roulette?" Harry asked.

"You just have one bullet, and you give the cylinder a spin," Stanley explained. "Then you put the gun up to your head and pull the trigger. If you win, nothing happens. If you lose, you kill yourself. It all depends on where the bullet stops when you spin the cylinder."

"And this crazy fool's been doin' that?" Harry demanded in disbelief.

"Twice he did it," Stanley said. "Didn't he, Rob?"

Robbie nodded his head.

"Didn't he, Rob?" Stanley said again.

"I said yes," Robbie told him angrily. "What's the matter? You deaf?"

Harry Steen turned toward Alan. "Give me that gun, Al," he commanded.

"Leave me alone!" Alan said.

"There's nothin' big about what you're doin'!" Harry said. "You're just doin' it to show off." He started walking toward Alan.

"You wantta play?" Alan said. He gave the cylinder a spin, leveled the gun at Harry, and pulled the trigger. There was a click.

Harry jumped back. "The sonofabitch's crazy!" he declared.

"You better get that gun away from him before he hurts someone," Jack Deno said.

"How the hell am I gonna get it?" Harry demanded. "He just tried to shoot me!"

"Shoot 'im back, Harry; you got a gun," someone said, and the crowd laughed.

"Here comes Clyde," someone shouted.

The crowd^o was hushed instantly. A corridor opened, and Clyde came into Alan's view at the end of it. A few men in the crowd spoke to Clyde or nodded solemnly as he passed through. But for once in his life Clyde was not seeking the approval of others. He ignored the greetings. His eyes were wild looking, excited. Alan could see them glitter in the light of the street lamp.

"You better be careful, Clyde," Harry Steen warned. "He's got a gun."

Clyde stopped on the inner edge of the semi-circle and faced Alan across the thirty-foot gap. The corridor closed behind him.

"Alan you come home right now!" Clyde ordered.

There was the same uncompromising ring in his voice and the same lack of understanding in his face that there had been back in the apartment. Alan felt shame and a futile sense of not being worthy.

"Leave me be," he said.

He moved sideways keeping his eyes on Clyde's face and sliding his back against Vic's reassuring, brick wall. He edged along swiftly feeling like an animal at bay, and the semi-circle of disembodied faces on that side fell back. His feet struck the first step of an iron fire escape leading to an overhead apartment. He felt quick panic as if he had just been trapped, and the great circle of deaths' heads before him changed into trappers closing in to make the kill. He ran up the steps two at a time.

"He's running up the fire escape!" he heard someone in the crowd yell.

At the landing he turned, his heart hammering. Clyde was half way up the steps behind him. Back of Clyde were Harry Steen and Deno and Robbie and three or four others just

ready to start up. Alan leveled the gun at his pursuers, and all movement on the fire escape was frozen.

"Stop where you are!" Alan shouted at Clyde. "I'd just as soon shoot you as anybody. I'd rather!"

"I said you come home, young man!" Clyde shouted up at him, but he didn't move any closer.

"And I said you leave me be!" Alan shouted back, equaling the volume of Clyde's voice and then exceeding it.

"That hain't no way to talk to 'im," Vic called up to Clyde from the ground. "You gotta coax 'im.' He's all excited."

Clyde bristled. "Coax him hell! I'm his father, and he damned well better do what I say! I'm goin' up and get him!"

"You better be careful, Clyde," Harry Steen said. "He'll pull the trigger. He did at me."

Clyde looked uncertainly back at Alan. The hard look on his face dissolved and formed itself into a look of bewilderment. "Are you crazy, Alan?" he demanded weakly as if he didn't want the crowd to hear. "I'm your father!"

"I know who you are," Alan said.

"I love you, Alan." There was a humble quality in Clyde's voice that Alan had never heard before. "You're my son! Even if you are . . . a . . . even if you—" He couldn't finish the statement. He made a new start. "I don't care *what* you are!"

Alan sneered at him. "Thanks, Sporty," he said.

Clyde took another step upward. "Come home with me, son," he said.

Alan hadn't heard that note in his father's voice since he was three-years-old. He wanted to drop the gun and throw himself crying into Clyde's arms and have Clyde pet him and say everything was all right. Only he wasn't three-years-old now, and everything wasn't all right, and his father could never again say anything tender to him without making it sound like trying to sell a furnace.

"You don't give a goddam for me!" The gun in Alan's hand twitched. He couldn't hold it still. "You never did! Me

or Mom either! All you ever cared about is whores!" He wanted the words to hurt. The way he had been hurt so many times lying in bed with his head jammed between the wall and the mattress to shut out sounds of his mother's crying in the next room.

Clyde was stunned. Alan could see that, and he felt a flash of exultation. For the first time in his life, he had got through to his father. That alone was nearly worth the price. Abruptly Clyde turned away and started down the steps. The crowd at the bottom of the fire escape stood aside to make a passage for him, never taking their eyes off Alan on the landing, eager not to miss anything. Clyde was lost from sight.

The scene had taken on the garish aspect of an auction sale where everyone forms a ring around the auctioneer. That was Alan, up on his block, and the thing he was auctioning off was death.

There were several cigarettes going in the crowd down below, and every now and then someone would cup a match to light another. Every time it happened, the smoker's face would be illuminated, and Alan would have a quick flash of bright eyes watching him speculatively. The rest of the time the crowd was an indistinct blur, the only bit of color being the glowing ends of cigarettes, and Alan could imagine red eyeballs that had popped out of their owners' heads in their very eagerness.

"Here's Clyde comin' back!" someone down below shouted.

"Who's that with him?"

"It's that fella from the paper!"

The crowd drew apart to let Clyde and Howard through. Some who had been squatting stood up like theatregoers who have read the script and know when it's time for the climax. Clyde and Howard stopped at the foot of the fire escape.

"I've brought Howard, Alan," Clyde called up. "Will you let *him* take you home?"

Alan felt a little dizzy. He started to take a deep breath, but he had forgotten about his nose. Right in the middle of breathing, the pain made him whimper, and he finished the intake of air through his mouth. The intake and the whimper both coming at the same time got mixed in his throat and sounded like some kind of animal noise. Anyone hearing it would think he was crazy for sure.

It was a three-story building. A second set of steps extended the fire escape from the landing where he stood to the top floor. Alan bolted up the second set of steps, feeling the frame beneath him tremble and hearing shoes on the iron treads below.

He halted at the top and looked down. Dark figures were strung out all the way from the lower landing to the ground. Harry Steen was pushing against them, forcing them back down the steps.

"You wantta tear this thing loose from the wall?" Alan heard him say. "Them bolts'll pull right out. We got too much weight up here."

He shoved the dark figures back, leaving only Clyde and Howard on the landing below. As Alan watched, Robbie slipped beneath Harry Steen's restraining arm and joined Howard and Clyde at the foot of the second set of steps. Then Jack Deno slipped beneath the other arm, and there were four faces looking up at him. Harry Steen held the rest of the crowd in obedience.

"Talk to him," Clyde commanded Howard.

Howard started slowly up the steps, holding on to the railing and talking as he climbed. "Put down that gun, Alan," he said softly, and Alan could tell he was scared. "There's nothing wrong with you," he was saying. "You're perfectly normal."

Alan was aware that he was crying. He could feel the hot tears burning in his eyes. And he could feel all the others that hadn't been shed yet burning inside him. He lifted the gun. "Don't come any closer!" he warned. "I'll kill you!"

Howard was about halfway up. He turned to Clyde right behind him. "He's all emotional," Howard said. "If we just let him alone, he'll come down when he's ready."

"I want him down now!" Clyde said. "You're the reason he's up there! Now you better get him down!" It was a threat.

Howard started climbing again. "Put down that gun, Alan," he said. "Nothing's going to hurt you." It was the same thing Brother Phillcrest had said to him that first time in the church study.

"Don't come any closer!" Alan screamed.

"He has to come closer!" Clyde shouted from behind Howard's back. "If he don't, I'll knock him over this railing."

Howard faltered and then came on, one slow step after another. Alan sobbed and backed into the far corner of the landing. His shoulder was against the building with the top bar of the iron railing pressed against his waist. Howard took the last step and stood on the landing with him. He shifted to one side, and for the first time Alan had a clear view of Clyde. Behind Clyde stood Robbie, white-faced and scared. Deno was standing about the middle of the flight of steps.

"What the hell are they doing up there, Deno?" Alan heard someone call up from the ground.

"They're just standing there," Deno shouted back.

Clyde took the last step and stood on the landing beside Howard.

Alan crouched in his corner. He lifted the gun and put the muzzle against his temple. "I'll shoot if you take another step!" he sobbed.

Something had broken loose in his nose. It was bleeding again. He could see the red drops on his clenched fingers holding the gun. Drops that looked and felt like warm, muddy rain.

"Put down that gun and come along, Alan," Clyde said

sternly. "We've had enough of this damned foolishness." He took a step forward.

Alan pulled the trigger and felt the gun vibrate against his skin like something alive. There was a click.

Clyde stepped back hastily. "Alan! Stop that!" It was a horrified command. Then Clyde's voice became more controlled, compelling. The voice he used to sell furnaces. "You don't wantta kill yourself, do you?"

Alan slumped in his corner. His father's figure was limned like a giant against the feeble rays of light that ventured up from the street lamp below into the rarefied atmosphere of the third story landing.

"There's no reason for you to be like this, Alan," Clyde was saying earnestly. "No one in your family was *ever* like that. If there was a *man* in the world, it's your old Dad. You believe that, don't you, son?"

Alan listened hungrily. If he could only hear his father's story of The Creation once more, and if this time it could be worded to include both himself *and* his father.

"I believe it," Alan said weakly.

"Can't you be like me?" Clyde said.

"I don't know," Alan said. "Everything's all mixed up."

"There's nothing to be mixed up about any longer, Alan." It was Howard's voice he heard. "You're all right."

Clyde turned savagely to Howard. "Stay out of this!" he commanded. "You're a homosexual pervert! I'd be doing the world a favor if I pushed you over that goddam railing right now!"

Howard's voice came angry and charged with repressed emotion suddenly set free. "There's a lot more homosexuality in the world than anyone knows about!" he lashed out. "Before you accuse anyone else, you better be sure your own fingers won't be pinched!"

Clyde was flabbergasted. "Are you accusing *me* of being queer?" They were shocked words framing an incredulous thought.

Howard's look was horrible in the sickly, yellow light that came through the cracks in the floor of the landing and fell across his face in a satanic pattern. "I'm saying the things you do could be considered homosexual just as much as anything I've done! Or Alan!"

The charge seemed to frighten Clyde. "You're crazy!"

"I've heard your arguments every time you come home!" Howard said. "I know about all your different women! Everyone in the neighborhood knows about them!"

"I've slept with more women than you ever shook hands with!" Clyde asserted as if laying claim to a distinction Howard threatened to wrest away from him. "But they was *women* I slept with!"

"Why did you need to sleep with so many?" Howard demanded. "Was it because you never found one that could satisfy your craving for very long at a time? Maybe you don't really enjoy it at all."

"I'm a ladies' man." Clyde's words came as if by rote. "That's the way the Good Lord made me." It was the story of The Creation. Alan listened as if he had never heard it before. "It's like breathing with me. Or eating when I'm hungry."

"Science could have a different explanation for it!" Howard's voice had a triumphant ring. "They might say you've been getting into bed with the wrong sex all this time!"

The words spitted Clyde's inner soul and dragged it forth like cold tongue. He stood transfixed for full twenty seconds unable to speak. His jaw sagged in disbelief. His eyes gaped in ludicrous shock. Then the slack pieces of his face came together again, and Clyde looked as if he were going to cry.

Alan's head cleared as if a cold wind had blown across the landing. *Getting into bed with the wrong sex!* What a hell of a fine joke that would be if it were only true. All those wasted years. All those wasted women. Alan laughed. He couldn't control himself. He put his head back and laughed until he

felt dizzy. He slid to the iron floor of the landing unable to stand, and his hand holding the gun fell weakly across his lap.

The two men stood looking at him, motionless as if their feet were stuck fast. Only Robbie Hite moved. He took the last few steps to the landing and crossed to Alan.

"Give me that gun, Al," he said. "My dad'll raise hell when he hears about this."

Alan let him take the revolver, and Robbie went back down the steps. He passed Deno on the fire escape, and the two descended together. Howard crossed to Alan and helped him to stand.

"Come on, Alan," Howard said. "You better go home now."

Alan permitted himself to be led. They started down the steps, and Clyde came behind them, stunned and silent. At the lower landing the crowd once more became a reality, a world, temporarily suspended, coming back into focus.

"What the hell went on up there, Deno?" Alan heard someone say.

"Hell, it was a picture show, man!" Deno said.

"What happened? Was he still doin' that Russian roulette crap?"

"What's Russian roulette?" someone else asked.

"Here I'll show you!" Deno's voice coming up the fire escape was charged with excitement. "Give me that gun, Hite!"

Robbie's voice was a protest. "Leave me be!"

"Give me that gun, goddammit!" Deno said. "I wantta show 'em what he was doing!"

"Here," Alan heard Robbie say.

"How do you unload it?"

"I took the shell out already," Robbie said.

"Okay, here's how he was doing," came Deno's voice. "He was hunkered up in a corner of the landing, see? Like a little bitch dog that's been rained on."

At the foot of the fire escape Alan saw Deno squat down on the bottom step to illustrate.

"And he had the gun up to his head like this," came Deno's excited voice. "Ever once in awhile he'd pull the trigger."

There was a click that Alan knew well. The hammer of the gun falling on an empty chamber. Then there was a roar and a flash of orange flame in the semi-darkness. Alan felt a tremor pass up the iron railing he held on to; and he saw Deno's squatting figure stretch out on its face at the foot of the steps like a bullfrog leaping off a lily pad.

When Alan and Howard reached the bottom, there was a complete hush over everything. They stood on the step, with Clyde looking over their shoulders, and stared at the sprawled out figure of Jack Deno. Already a stream of blood was widening around his head.

Vic Hamilton knelt at his side briefly and stood again almost as if it were one motion.

"Is he dead?" someone said in an awed voice.

Vic nodded. "The whole side of his head's blown out."

There was another hush, and then someone said to Robbie, "I thought you took the shell out."

Robbie was standing close to the head of the stretched out figure. "I thought I did," he said.

The pool of blood found an outlet and became an ever-deepening stream that followed a passage between a row of worn-down bricks directly toward Robbie's feet. Robbie let the blood flow against his shoes without moving.

"The goddam sonofabitch," he said, as if he had pronounced benediction.

Alan broke away from Howard and Clyde and walked towards Deno's body. The crowd stepped aside as he neared the bloodied corpse. Looking down on it, Alan felt a sudden spasm of terror, and then his fear subsided. Now he was sure of himself. Now he was sure of who he really was—of the man he was going to be. Seeing Deno lying there he rec-

ognized him for the monster he had been when he was alive. Deno—everybody's idea of a guy who was *all man*—had lived and died like an animal. Not only would Alan never be frightened of Deno again; he knew that he would never be bullied or taunted or beaten by any of Deno's ideas. For an instant, Alan blinked back a final tear, and in that brief moment in time he saw not Deno lying there, but his father. He was not shocked. It all seemed to be very right though he couldn't begin to explain why.

"We're going home, Alan," Clyde called out.

"I'm going home alone, *real man!*" Alan answered sneeringly.

He walked shakily at first, and then his pace steadied. He felt strength returning to him quickly. When he got to his house he didn't go in. He stood in his back yard and looked across the brown grass and the white jungle of clothes-line. Clear over on Beech Street he saw the fresh green roof of Carol Hibble's house sticking up above the others. He had never noticed before that Carol's house could be seen from there. It seemed so very close.

Very sure now of where he wanted to be, of with whom he wanted to be, he headed straight for Carol's house. There was a lot they had to talk about, and Alan understood everything he had to say.

THE WILDEST OF A WILD BUNCH

Nobody dared call Alan Peerman chicken! At seventeen he was the wildest kid in the roughest crowd in town. There wasn't anything he wouldn't do on a dare—including hanging off a trestle bridge while a train roared over him, or sleeping with the local tramp just to see if she had VD.

The stunts were crazy and dangerous, but Alan didn't care. He had a desperate, all-consuming urge to prove something to himself. It would make a "real man" out of him—if it didn't destroy him first.

Written with a no-punches-pulled realism, **ALL SHOOK UP** is a sincere and honest novel about today's teenage world. If it seems shocking, it's because today's headlines are dealing daily with boys just like Alan and his gang.

AN ACE BOOK

ALL SHOOK UP

Peyson Antholz